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Abstract

In his *Système de philosophie*, the Cartesian philosopher Pierre-Sylvain Régis claimed to have found a refutation of scepticism so simple, that it made him wonder why others had been so slow in seeing this way out of doubt and uncertainty. However, Régis's proof has been criticized by his contemporary Jean Duhamel and by modern scholars such as Norman Wells. In this paper, I argue that Régis's refutation of scepticism needs to be read in the light of ideas developed by such fellow-Cartesians as Antoine Arnauld and Robert Desgabets. Contextualizing Régis's argument, I propose, will help us to see how some of the difficulties that have been raised for his argument can be addressed.

Résumé

Dans son *Système de philosophie*, le philosophe cartésien Pierre-Sylvain Régis prétend avoir trouvé une réfutation du scepticisme si simple qu'il se demande pourquoi les autres ont mis tant de temps à se sortir du doute et de l'incertitude. Toutefois, la preuve de Régis a été critiquée par son contemporain Jean Duhamel et par des interprètes contemporains tels que Norman Wells. Cet article soutient que la réfutation du scepticisme de Régis doit être lue à la lumière des idées développées par d'autres philosophes cartésiens de l'époque tels qu'Antoine Arnauld et Robert Desgabets, et que cette contextualisation de la preuve de Régis est cruciale pour répondre à plusieurs des critiques qui lui ont été adressées.

Anti-Scepticism in the Wake of Descartes. The Case of Pierre-Sylvain Régis

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Pierre-Sylvain Régis (1632-1707) was one of the most important Cartesians of the late seventeenth century. He was nicknamed “the prince of the Cartesians” by his contemporary Pierre-Daniel Huet (who did not intend that as a compliment), and Tad Schmaltz has cast Régis alongside Robert Desgabets as one of the principal “radical Cartesians” of his time (see Schmaltz, 2002).

In this paper, I will look at a proof for the existence of external bodies that Régis outlines in his huge *Système de Philosophie* of 1690. Régis believes that his proof is both simple and powerful. Indeed, he claims to have considerably gone beyond Descartes, who had had to evoke a benign God in order to counter scepticism. At the same time, however, Régis’ argument echoes a number of important concepts from Descartes’ *Meditations*. Thus, Régis tries to go beyond Descartes by further elaborating on the concepts and theories of his predecessor. But how successful was this attempt? According to the modern scholar Norman Wells, Régis takes over from Arnauld a certain understanding of the term “objective being” that marks a break with both Descartes and scholastic tradition. And this, Wells submits, undermines the power of Régis’ anti-sceptical proof (see Wells, 1999). Again, Régis’ scholastic contemporary Jean Du Hamel argued that Régis’ confident anti-scepticism relies on an oversimplification of the Cartesian philosophy. Both Du Hamel and Wells formulate legitimate problems for Régis’ epistemology. In what follows, however, I will argue that both of their problems can at least to some extent be mended. At the same time, it will become clear that Régis’ anti-scepticism is not so simple and straightforward as he says it is. Indeed, I suggest that Régis’ anti-

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scepticism may ultimately rely on his, rather complex, metaphysics of divine creation.

I proceed as follows. In Section I, I sketch Régis' proof for the existence of extended beings. In Section II, the problem that Wells raises for Régis is introduced. I outline an answer to that problem in Section III. This will involve turning to the thinker whom Wells casts as the source of Régis' problems: Arnauld. I present Du Hamel's problem in Section IV. The discussion there naturally raises the question whether Régis has a convincing answer to scenarios of divine deception.

Section I. Ideas and Exemplary Causes

According to Régis, scepticism can be defeated by reflecting on the nature of our ideas. Like his fellow-Cartesians Arnauld and Desgabets, Régis (1691a: I, 1) uses "idea" as a synonym of "thought" ("perception").¹ Every thought or idea, he explains, has two dimensions. On the one hand, every idea is a modification of someone's mind. On the other, every idea is the idea of something: there is something it represents. For example, my idea of the sun can be described by saying that it is a mode of my mind, or by saying that it is a representation of the sun. In Régis' own words: every idea has both "formal being" (qua modification of a mind) and "objective being" (qua representation of this or that). Régis also speaks of the objective being of an idea as its "power to represent" (196).

Having drawn this distinction, Régis proceeds to ask how our ideas must be causally accounted for. In his discussion of this question, he first introduces a general rule: "[U]n effet ne peut avoir plus de perfection qu'il en a reçu de sa cause totale" (69). The perfections of an effect, that is, cannot go beyond those of its cause. If an effect has perfection *F*, it must owe that perfection to a cause that has *F*-ness too. Otherwise, the effect would have gotten its *F*-ness *ex nihilo*. In a second stage, he asks whether our ideas could have been caused by our own minds only. His answer is that this depends on how one describes them. If we describe our ideas as mere mental modes – if we concentrate on their formal being, that is – intramental causation suffices to account for them. This is compatible with the general rule that effects cannot exceed their causes. If we

¹ Cf. Desgabets, 1675: 106 and Arnauld, *Des vraies et des fausses idées*: chap. 5, in Arnauld, 1780: XXXVIII, 198.

describe ideas as representations, however – if we concentrate on their objective being, that is – things are more complicated. For according to Régis, his general causal rule implies that the objective being of every idea must have been caused by something that really (“formally”) contains all the represented perfections: “La propriété que chaque idée a de représenter une chose plutôt qu’une autre, suppose nécessairement un objet actuellement existant qui contient formellement toutes les perfections que l’idée représente” (75). Thus, Régis draws an inference from 1) the perfections of an effect cannot go beyond those of its cause, to 2) every idea for its objective being is dependent upon an actually existent cause that formally contains all the represented perfections.

Régis also put this point in terms of “exemplary causality”: an idea owes its objective being to an actually existent exemplary cause that formally contains all the represented perfections: “[T]outes les idées, quant à la propriété de représenter, dépendent de leurs objets comme de leurs causes exemplaires”, and “la cause exemplaire des idées doit contenir formellement toutes les perfections que les idées représentent” (77). My idea represents what it represents because it was as it were “modeled after” a cause that formally contains all the represented perfections. According to Régis, this conclusion allowed him to demonstrate the existence of extended substance (also “extension”, for short) and its modes. By “extended substance”, Régis, like Desgabets, meant the total quantity of matter in the universe, of which all singular bodies (this stone, that tree) are modifications. Extended substance, for Régis, is “un tout dont les corps particuliers sont les parties intégrantes, en tant qu’ils ont résulté de sa division” (201).² The existence of extended substance can be proven by reflecting on one’s idea of extension. Qua mode of my mind, my idea of extension might have been caused by my mind. But 2 says that qua representation of extension, my idea of extended substance must have been caused by extended substance. From the mere fact that I can entertain an idea of extension, it follows that an extended substance must at some point have existed as the cause of my idea’s objective being (see 74-78). And from this, I can further conclude that extended substance still exists. For, again like his fellow-Cartesian Desgabets, Régis believed that substances are indefectible. Therefore, if extended substance exists at one moment of time, it does so at all future moments too (see 90).³

The existence of extended modal beings is established in a similar way. Régis derives from 2 that the sun or this stone must at some moment of time

² Cf. Desgabets, 1983-1985: 88 and 92.

³ On the “indefectibility thesis” in Desgabets, see Easton, 2005.

have existed to exemplarily cause the objective being of my ideas of them. Yet, unlike substances, modal beings are defectible. They can go out of existence. Hence, something more than 2 is needed to warrant belief in the current existence of modal beings. According to Régis, this belief is undergirded by the fact that our bodies are sensorily affected from without in ways that do not depend on our will and the variety of which argues the actual division of extension in different modes or parts (see 105).

Régis was euphoric about the anti-sceptical potential of his philosophy. About his proof for the existence of extension, for example, he wrote:

[C]ette manière de démontrer l'existence de l'étenduë est si simple et si naturelle, que je ne puis concevoir pourquoi j'ay esté si long-temps à la comprendre, et à me délivrer par ce moyen de l'erreur où j'étois, de croire qu'il n'y avoit que la foy qui me pouvoit rendre certain de l'existence de l'étenduë (75).⁴

Indeed, Régis thought he had significantly gone beyond Descartes, whose appeal to a benign God could offer but a probable argument for the existence of extramental extension corresponding to my idea of it: “car de dire simplement que si cela n'estoit pas vray, Dieu seroit un trompeur, ce seroit plutôt alléguer une raison de convenance, qu'apporter la véritable cause de la vérité de nos idées” (Régis, 1691b: 91-92).

But if Régis has indeed gone beyond Descartes, his argument clearly echoes a number of important Cartesian concepts. Thus, the causal rule that effects cannot exceed their causes famously features in Descartes' Third Meditation (AT: VII, 40 and CSM: II, 28). And it would seem that Descartes' distinction there between the formal and objective reality of an idea neatly mirrors Régis' distinction between ideas qua modes of thought and ideas qua representations. Generally, indeed, one might think of Régis' anti-scepticism as leaning on a generalization of Descartes' causal proof of God's existence. As Descartes had argued in the Third Meditation, the “objective reality” that is contained in my idea of God infinitely exceeds my mind and therefore can only have been caused by God himself. Reflecting on my idea of God, then, allows me to conclude that he exists. What Régis has done, it seems, is to use the very same argumentative strategy to prove the existence of many other things too.

But is the similarity a genuine one? And is Régis' confident anti-scepticism really warranted? Both questions have been answered in the negative by Régis' contemporary Jean Du Hamel and the modern scholar Norman Wells.

⁴ Régis (1691a), p. 75.

According to Wells, the usage of “objective being” that Régis inherits from Arnauld marks a break with both scholastic tradition and Descartes. And this fact seriously impinges on the success of Régis’ existential proofs, Wells argues. This critique will be discussed in Sections II and III below. According to Du Hamel, Régis had oversimplified Descartes’ thought. More precisely, Régis had turned a blind eye to Descartes’ notion of “eminent containment” of effects in their causes. This notion and the problems surrounding it will be discussed in Section IV. Until that time, however, I will put them to one side.

Section II. Wells’ Problem

According to Wells, there is a basic affinity between the way in which scholastics such as Francisco Suárez spoke of “objective concepts” and the way in which Descartes spoke of “objective reality” or “idea taken objectively”. But, Wells claims, Régis follows Arnauld in using the term “objective being” in a rather different way, which causes a problem for his anti-sceptical argument.

Suárez distinguished between “formal concepts” and “objective concepts”. Formal concepts are operations of the mind that represent things to us. The objects that are represented by these operations, however, can be called “objective concepts”. For example, when I think of Peter, Peter himself is an objective concept. My thought of Peter, however, is a formal concept. This formal concept enshrines two dimensions. On the one hand, it is a mere state of my mind. But on the other, it is a representation that pertains to Peter. To view it merely qua state of mind is to view it “materially”, Suárez explains. To view it qua representation of Peter, however, is to view it “formally” (*Disputationes Metaphysicae* II, 1, 1 and VIII, 3, 16, in Suárez, 1856: XXV, 65a-b and 288a).

This material-formal-objective terminology returns in and around Descartes’ *Meditations*. Thus, in the Fourth Replies to Arnauld, Descartes explains that ideas can be viewed either materially or formally (AT: VII, 232 and CSM: II, 163). To view an idea materially is to view it qua modification of the mind. To take it formally, however, is to view it as a representation of this or that. But, as we are told in the Preface, ideas can also be viewed “objectively” (AT: VII, 8 and CSM: II, 7). Objectively, the idea of the sun just is the sun itself, albeit in a special, intramental mode of being (see AT: VII, 102-103 and CSM: II, 75). Just as Suárez’ objective concept, Descartes’ idea taken objectively just is the thing that is represented, then. The main difference is that for Descartes,

ideas taken objectively always enjoy intramental existence (see Wells, 1990: 42-43).

There is considerable disagreement over how exactly Descartes' terminology must be interpreted. According to Wells, however, Descartes is a true heir to scholastic tradition when he introduces his material-formal-objective terminology. Thus, on Wells' reading, the term "idea" in Descartes can be used for both i) an act of cognition and ii) an intramentally existent object of cognition. In Wells' own words, Descartes is distinguishing between "the knowing process and a distinct intramental non-representative being" (151).⁵ On his interpretation, "idea taken objectively" picks out ii. The terms "idea taken materially" and "idea taken formally", by contrast, pick out two aspects of i, respectively: i^a) the act qua state of mind only, and i^b) the act qua representation. For example, when I think of the sun, I engage in i) an act of thought that is directed at ii) an intramentally existent sun. My act of thought can be described as i^a) a mere state of my mind, and this is what Descartes means by "idea taken materially". Alternatively, the act of thought can be viewed as i^b) a state of my mind precisely insofar as it is representative of the sun. This is what is described by "idea taken formally". Lastly, the terms "idea taken objectively" stand for ii) the intramentally existent sun. In the Third Meditation, Descartes also speaks of the "formal reality" of an idea and the "objective reality" that is contained in it in order to refer to i^a and ii (see AT: VII, 40 and CSM: II, 27-28, and Wells, 1994: 145).

Now, Wells submits that, as from Arnauld, Cartesians no longer used "objective being" and "objective reality" to refer to objects of representation. They no longer used these terms to refer to ii, that is. Rather, they used these terms to refer to that which does the representing. Thus, Arnauld speaks of "that which represents a circle" to me as "ce qu'on appelle autrement la réalité objective du cercle", and Régis defines "objective being" as an idea's "vertu de représenter" (Arnauld, 1780: XL, 61). From this, Wells concludes that in these authors, terms like "objective being" and "objective reality" have taken the place of i^b in Descartes. They are used to refer to a mental act insofar as it is representative of something. Now, Descartes had said that ideas taken objectively may require more than intramental causation. Viewed qua modes of the mind, however, intramental causation suffices to account for our ideas (see AT: VII, 40-41 and CSM: II, 27-28). But according to Wells, Arnauld cannot say

⁵ Cf. Secada, 2000: 78-80.

that the objective reality of an idea can call for an extramental cause. Since it has been reduced to *ib*, in Arnauld the term “objective reality” refers just to an act of the mind, viewed *qua* representation. But this very same act can also be described as simply a mental modification. Therefore, Wells submits, there is no reason why objective reality in Arnauld should ever call for anything but the mind itself to bring it about. However, in Arnauld, no extramental efficient cause is at issue as it was for Descartes: “Arnauld’s [objective reality] calls only for an intramental cause, no less than the perceiving activity itself” (Wells, 1994: 154).⁶ This is a problem that, according to Wells, Régis inherits from Arnauld alongside his use of “objective being”.

Clearly, the problem as Wells presents it heavily relies on a certain interpretation of Descartes. And this reading can be challenged. For instance, while Wells distinguishes between *ib* and *ii*, Lilli Alanen contends that there is no difference between ideas taken formally and ideas taken objectively (see Alanen, 2003: 131).⁷ Hence, one might be tempted to dismiss the problem that Wells raises for Arnauld and Régis simply by criticizing the Descartes-interpretation that he relies on. This is not, however, what I propose to do. Rather, I shall remain noncommittal as to the virtues and vices of Wells’ Descartes-exegesis. For I believe that, independently of the merits of that exegesis, the problem that Wells raises is a valid one. He is right to point out that it is not obvious why Arnauld’s or Régis’ objective reality and objective being should ever require more than intramental causation. Therefore, I shall proceed as follows. First, I will reformulate Wells’ problem by explaining why that is not obvious; second, I will, in Section III, suggest a solution to the problem.

The Problem Restated

Here I argue that there is textual evidence to the effect that for both Arnauld and Régis, an idea represents *x* rather than *y* because of its internal structure or configuration. Since for Arnauld and Régis, ideas are thoughts (“perceptions”) that modify the mind, this means that the representative power of an idea consists in the internal structure or configuration of a mental state. But it is not clear that the configuration of a mental state requires more than a substantial mind to cause it. It is not obvious, that is, that Arnauld’s and Régis’

⁶ Also see Wells, 1999: 270–271.

⁷ Cf. Clemenson, 2007.

objective reality and objective being ever require more than intramental causation. Here lies the legitimacy of Wells' query.

That the objective reality of an idea for Arnauld indeed amounts to its being internally structured in a certain way can be gleaned from his discussion with Pierre Bayle on the difference between carnal and spiritual pleasures in the *Dissertation sur le prétendu bonheur des plaisirs des sens* of 1687. According to Bayle, all pleasures are spiritual in so far as they are mental occurrences.⁸ However, some are called "carnal" rather than properly "spiritual" because they have been occasioned by, say, the odour of roasted meat rather than incense. In fact, Bayle thinks that what kind of pleasure is instantiated by one single modification of the mind depends on the cause that induced that modification, not on its internal properties. Thus, changing the occasional cause of some modification is sufficient for changing the character of that modification from spiritual to carnal: "Changez seulement les causes occasionnelles de ces deux plaisirs [a carnal and a spiritual one], et laissez-les en eux-mêmes ce qu'ils étoient auparavant, vous trouverez qu'il faudra faire un échange de leur titre, et appeller corporel celui qu'on nommoit spirituel" (Bayle, 1971: 455a). In his reply, Arnauld broadens the object of the discussion somewhat by taking Bayle's claim about pleasures to be applicable to other kinds of mental modifications as well. Thus, he also mentions thoughts, volitions and pleasures. All these mental states, Arnauld thinks, have in common that they are modifications of a mind; they do differ enormously, however, when they are considered with regard to their objects, "par rapport à leur objet". Now, what does this "rapport à leur objet" consist in? The following passage sheds light on this issue:

Ils [our thoughts, volitions etc.] ont un autre rapport à ce qui est leur objet, en quoi ils peuvent être fort différents. Car qui peut douter, que l'ame d'un homme qui aime Dieu [...] ne soit autrement modifiée, que l'ame d'un homme qui aime la bonne chère (Arnauld, 1780: XL, 60)?

The connective "car" suggests that the fact that the mind is now modified in one way and then in another is sufficient for saying that it is now engaged in a thought of x and then in a thought of y . I now think of x and later think of y because the thought that now modifies my mind has one structure, while the thought that later modifies it has another.

⁸ See his *Réponse de l'Auteur des Nouvelles de la République des Lettres à l'avis qui lui a été donné sur ce qu'il avoit dit en faveur du P. Malebranche, touchant le plaisir des sens, &c.* of 1685, in Bayle, 1971: 444-461.

As Arnauld goes on, it appears that, moreover, in order for some thought or idea to be of x rather than y , it is necessary that it be structured in one way rather than another. This becomes clear when he contrasts his position to Malebranche's, which he thinks is similar to Bayle's. In his *Trois Lettres* of 1685, Malebranche had argued that our mental modifications "contain" what they represent in the sense that they are related to ideas in God's mind. Drawing on Malebranche's own metaphor (see Malebranche, 1958-1984: VI, 217), Arnauld explained his adversary's position as follows: just as a purse will be the same purse, whether we remove the coins and replace them for tokens ("jetons") or not, it is possible for one modification of the mind to have different contents, depending on the extramental objects to which it is related (which it contains). Arnauld strongly disagrees: it is impossible that "la perception que j'ai d'une araignée, sans rien changer de ce qu'elle a de physique et de réel, pourroit devenir la perception d'un éléphant" (Arnauld, 1780: XL, 61).

In order for a given idea or thought to pertain to x rather than y , then, it must be structured in one way rather than another. Putting together these results, one can say that for Arnauld, the representative power of an idea or thought consists in its internal structure (see Nadler, 1989: 170). Objective reality, that is, consists in the internal structure or configuration of a mental state. But this raises the question why, on Arnauld's account, anything more than intramental causation should be needed in order to account for the objective reality of an idea. Indeed, we can see why Wells should say that in Arnauld, objective reality "calls only for an intramental cause, no less than the perceiving activity itself". There is textual evidence to the effect that for Régis too, the representational capacity of an idea stems from its internal configuration. Again, then, the question arises why a mental configuration should require more than intramental causation.

In reply to his critic Du Hamel, Régis explained that the power of ideas to represent objects relates to ideas qua modifications as form to matter (see Régis, 1692: 6).⁹ Unfortunately, Régis does not work out this concept. But arguably, our best chance of acquiring a better understanding of just how he envisages the relation between the power of ideas to represent and ideas qua modifications lies in looking at what he has to say about the notions of "form" and "matter" in the "Physique" of his *Système*. As a Cartesian, Régis was of course not likely to be very benevolently disposed to scholastic hylomorphism.

⁹ On the controversy between Régis and DuHamel, see also Ariew, 2011: 123-125.

Indeed, one would expect him to launch the stock critique against formal explanations that forms constitute a kind of queer substances over and above the matter they inform.¹⁰ Interestingly, however, Régis does not level this critique. On the contrary, he warns that on Aristotle's account, forms were nothing like autonomous substances. Rather, Régis claims, forms were just the organizational principles of matter, and to say that a piece of matter is informed by a given form is to say that it is modified or configured in a certain way. When Aristotle spoke of forms in his *Physics*, then, "il semble insinuer que par ce mot, il ne faut entendre autre chose que les parties de la matière considérées comme telles ou telles, c'est-à-dire, comme modifiés de telle ou telle façon" (Régis, 1691a: I, 391). The specific properties of a given material body result from the configuration or organization of its parts, which organization may be called its form: "[I]l y a par exemple, dans la matière de l'or et du marbre un certain ordre et arrangement de parties, qui fait que la matière de l'or et du marbre a des propriétés qu'elle n'aurait pas, si les parties estoient autrement arrangées" (392).¹¹

What does this understanding of hylomorphism mean for Régis' claim that an idea's power to represent relates to an idea qua modification as form to matter? The most straightforward way to unpack this analogy is to say that an idea represents a given object because it is a modification having a certain kind of structure or internal configuration. But if that is indeed Régis' view, Wells' query gains salience again. For it seems that internal configurations of mental modifications could very well have been brought forth by the mind itself. Indeed, there seems to be no need to call for extramental causation here. In the following subsection, I address this problem by returning to the alleged source of Régis' troubles: Arnauld. I will argue that, *pace* Wells, there are scenarios where Arnauld's objective reality can call for extramental causation. This will suggest a solution to the problem that Wells finds with Régis' understanding of objective being as well.

Section III. Arnauld Revisited

It is true that Arnauld's objective reality consists in a determinate configuration of a given mental state. But we must also heed the notion in Arnauld that when I think of x , x has "objective being in the mind". We have to

¹⁰ On this stock critique, see Pasnau, 2004: 47f.

¹¹ See also Ott, 2008: 11. On Régis' physics in general, see Mouy, 1981: 145-167.

ask just what Arnauld meant when he claimed that something had objective being in the mind. According to John Yolton, Arnauld spelled out the notion of “objectively or intelligibly being in the intellect” in an ontologically neutral way so that to say that x objectively or intelligibly exists in the mind is simply to say that x is understood, perceived, cognized or represented (see Yolton, 1984: 38–39).¹² At first sight, there appears to be ample evidence for such a reading in Arnauld. Thus, we read that “une chose est objectivement dans mon esprit, quand je la conçois”, and that there is “point de différence, entre dire, que Dieu connoît une telle chose, et qu’une telle chose est objectivement en Dieu” (*Des vraies et des fausses idées*, chap. 5, in Arnauld, 1780: XXXVIII, 198).¹³ This could suggest that to say “ x objectively exists in my mind” is no more than a complex way of characterizing x as “cognized by me”.

But Arnauld’s notion of objectively being in the intellect is more substantial than that (see Kremer, 1994: 101). This comes to the fore in chapter 5 of *Des vraies et fausses idées*, where we are told that

[I] ne faut pas confondre l’idée d’un objet, avec cet objet conçu, à moins qu’on n’ajoute, en tant qu’il est objectivement dans l’esprit. Car être conçu, au regard du soleil qui est dans le ciel, n’est qu’une dénomination extrinseque, qui n’est qu’un rapport à la perception que j’en ai. Or ce n’est pas cela que l’on doit entendre, quand on dit, que l’idée du soleil est le soleil même, en tant qu’il est objectivement dans mon esprit. Et ce qu’on appelle être objectivement dans l’esprit, n’est pas seulement être l’objet, qui est le terme de ma pensée, mais c’est être dans mon esprit intelligiblement, comme les objets ont accoutumé d’y être (*Des vraies et des fausses idées*, chap. 5, in Arnauld, 1780: XXXVIII, 198).

Arnauld is clearly trying to hew as close to Descartes as possible here. He explains that for x to objectively exist in the intellect is not merely for x to be extrinsically denominated, just as Descartes had pointed out to Caterus in the First Replies (see AT: VII, 102–103 and CSM: II, 75). Rather, it is for x to genuinely have acquired an intramental mode of existence. In the following passage, Arnauld makes just that point when discussing an object’s “intelligible” existence in the intellect (which for him was tantamount to an object’s objective existence there¹⁴): “Un soleil intelligible n’est autre chose, selon ce que nous venons de voir dans S. Thomas, que le soleil matériel, selon ce qu’il est dans l’entendement de celui que le connoît: *secundum esse quod habet in cognoscente*” (*Des vraies et des fausses idées*, chap. 14, in Arnauld, 1780: XXXVIII, 251).

¹² Cf. Wells, 1994: 176–177.

¹³ Cf. *Des vraies et des fausses idées*, chap. 13, in Arnauld, 1780: XXXVIII, 247. See also 216.

¹⁴ Cf. “[O]n peut dire que ce qui est objectivement dans notre esprit y est intelligiblement” (*Des vraies et des fausses idées*, chap. 11, in Arnauld, 1780: XXXVIII, 230).

Thus, we have two claims in Arnauld: a) the objective reality of an idea is the configurational structure that makes it a representation of x rather than y ; and b) objects of representation have intramental or “objective” being. As far as I can see, an object’s having objective being for Arnauld is not something over and above its idea’s having a certain objective reality.¹⁵ Whenever x has objective being in my mind, one of my thoughts is structured or configured according to x . And whenever it is so structured, x has objective being in my mind. Indeed, I submit that the most straightforward way to square the foregoing two claims is as follows. According to Arnauld, c) an object x is represented by a certain configuration or structure of the mind, which configuration or structure somehow realizes x itself in a special, intramental mode of being. According to Arnauld, that is, an intramental instantiation of x is what structures my thought and makes it representative of x . What represents x , then, somehow is x itself.¹⁶ Now, if the configuration that represents x somehow realizes x itself, it becomes conceivable that more than a mind can be needed to make my thought representative of x . For if x is a being that goes beyond, or is “higher than”, my individual mind, could my mind have brought forth an instantiation of it? If, for instance, x is God, a Cartesian might reasonably contend that it takes more than my mind to causally account for an intramental instantiation of x .¹⁷ That is, despite appearances and *pace* Wells, it is not impossible for an Arnauldian objective reality to require an extramental cause.

At this point, let me return to Régis. Régis does not claim quite as clearly as Arnauld that thinking of the sun amounts to having an intelligible or objective sun in the mind. Hence, one cannot with certainty ascribe such a position to him. The claim that I want to make is a more modest one. It is that such a position would reveal a rationale behind Régis’ inference from 1) the perfections of an effect cannot go beyond those of its cause, to 2) every idea for its objective being is dependent upon an actually existent exemplary cause that formally contains all the represented perfections. To see this, suppose that my current idea has the power to represent x . Also suppose that it has this power or objective being because it somehow realizes or instantiates x itself. Now, what could have brought about such an instantiation of x ? In light of 1, it seems that

¹⁵ Here, I agree with Kremer, 1994: 99.

¹⁶ For similar interpretations of Descartes, see Perler, 2004: 75-76 and Clemenson, 2007: 59.

¹⁷ See the analysis of Descartes’ causal proof of God’s existence in Clemenson, 2007: 55-56.

it must be something with x 's perfections. In light of 1, that is, the most obvious candidate for causing the power to represent x of my current idea would seem to be x itself. Thus, 2 naturally comes into view.

To take stock, on Wells' reading, Arnauld and Régis reduced the objective reality or objective being of our ideas to properties of cognitive acts that can be caused by a substantial mind itself. But as I have argued, for Arnauld that which makes a thought representative of x is not *just* a mental configuration: it is also an intramental instantiation of that which is represented. It is such a view of representation, I submitted, that Régis may need as well. If Régis is implicitly relying on such a view, indeed, it would seem that he can plausibly maintain that a given idea's power to represent x requires x as its cause. He can insist on inference of 2 from 1 that Wells questioned, that is.

When Régis' argument is thus understood, it seems that it should be acceptable to many Cartesians, including Descartes himself. After all, thinkers such as Descartes and Arnauld were also committed to the causal axiom that effects cannot exceed their causes, and to the view that the idea of x somehow realizes x itself. And on my reconstruction, these are precisely the basic ingredients of Régis' anti-scepticism. Nevertheless, Descartes did not draw the strong anti-sceptical conclusion that Régis draws. According to Descartes, reflecting on the nature of my ideas suffices to prove the existence of God, but not that of other things. To prove the existence of material objects, indeed, I have to rely on God's benignity. Thus, the question arises whether Régis satisfactorily justifies the extent to which he goes beyond Descartes. As we shall see, it is not clear that he does. This comes to the fore by looking at the controversy between Régis and Du Hamel.

Section IV. A Problem from Descartes

Jean Du Hamel was a scholastic thinker with little affinity for Cartesian philosophy. It is hardly surprising, then, that he should launch a sustained critique against Régis' philosophy in the 1692 *Réflexions critiques sur le système cartésien de la philosophie de Mr. Régis*. In that work, Du Hamel does not only criticize Régis from his own, scholastic point of view. Interestingly, Du Hamel also submitted that Régis' epistemology should be unacceptable to those who are sympathetic to Descartes' thought.

More precisely, Du Hamel pointed out that according to Descartes, taken objectively, the ideas of material objects such as the sun or a stone might have been caused by our own minds rather than by those corporeal beings themselves. Descartes says of these ideas: “I can see nothing in them which is so great or excellent as to make it seem impossible that it originated in myself” (AT: VII, 43 and CSM: II, 29). To Du Hamel this suggested that even from a Cartesian point of view, Régis’ anti-sceptical proof must be “tres-defectueuse”:

On soutient au contraire, que cette preuve est tres-defectueuse, ainsi que Monsieur Descartes convient luy-même, Méditation 3, de l’existence de Dieu, nombre 22, où il dit. *Pour ce qui regarde les idées des choses corporelles, je n’y renconnois rien de si grand ni de si excellent, qui ne me semble pouvoir venir de moy-même*, et partant selon Monsieur Descartes, l’idée de l’étenduë peut venir de moy-même (Du Hamel, 1692: 66).

At first sight, Descartes’ claim may look a bit surprising. After all, we have seen that according to Descartes, my idea of the sun, taken objectively, just is the sun itself. Moreover, Descartes also believed that the perfections of an effect cannot go beyond those of its cause. Hence, the cause of my idea of the sun taken objectively, it seems, must somehow contain the perfections of the sun. Thus the sun itself comes into view as the obvious cause of my idea of the sun taken objectively. So why did Descartes not draw the conclusion that only the sun itself could cause my idea of the sun taken objectively?

The reason is that he believed that the perfections of the sun could be contained in some special way in my mind. The sun and its perfections can be said to be contained “eminently” there. In the following passage from his reply to the Second Objections, Descartes explains the distinction between “formal containment” and “eminent containment” as follows:

Whatever exists in the objects of our ideas in a way which exactly corresponds to our perception of it is said to exist *formally* in those objects. Something is said to exist *eminently* in an object when, although it does not exactly correspond to our perception of it, its greatness is such that it can fill the role of that which does so correspond (AT: VII, 161 and CSM: II, 114).

Thus, though the objective reality contained in my ideas of men, trees and horses is apt to be caused by men, trees and horses, it may also have been caused by something that surpasses men, trees and horses in greatness and which may thus have fulfilled the role of causing the objective reality of my ideas in their stead. In Descartes’ view, the human mind is one such being. Indeed, my mind sufficiently surpasses the sun, horses and stones in greatness in order for it to cause the objective reality contained in my ideas of them. In a nutshell, then, the perfections of the sun are formally contained in the sun itself,

but eminently in my mind. Therefore, both the sun and my mind are possible candidates for causing the objective reality contained in my idea of the sun.

The problem that Du Hamel raises for Régis is partially an argument from authority: Régis's epistemology conflicts with Descartes' thought, the authority of which Régis should accept. But Du Hamel's problem is not only an argument from authority. It also points to a philosophical difficulty for Régis. For if our minds are powerful enough to "fulfill the role" of material objects, then both material objects and our minds become candidates for causing the objective being of our ideas of material objects. We have seen that according to Régis, the perfections of an effect cannot go beyond those of its cause. Also, I have suggested that Régis may believe that the objective being of my idea of x somehow realizes x . If Régis was committed to both these claims, I argued, his conclusion that x itself is the obvious cause of the objective being of my idea of x becomes understandable. But if the perfections of x are not only formally contained in x itself, but also eminently in my mind, x no longer is the only obvious cause of the objective being of my idea of x . Indeed, my mind has become a potential cause too. In the light of this problem, it is important to see what Régis has to say in reply to the Descartes-passage that was adduced by Du Hamel.

In his 1692 *Réponse aux réflexions critiques*, Régis tries to explain away that passage. Indeed, he contends that Descartes had only meant to say of ideas viewed qua modes of mind that they can be intramentally caused:

J'avouë que dans le lieu cité M. Descartes dit qu'il semble que l'idée de l'étenduë puisse venir de nous-mêmes; mais il entend parler de l'idée de l'étenduë considérée selon son estre formel, et point du tout de l'idée de l'étenduë considérée selon son estre objectif (Regis, 1692: 37).

There is no doubt that Du Hamel's Descartes-exegesis is better than Régis' here (see Schmaltz, 2002: 235). It appears, then, that Régis underestimates the problem that the Cartesian passage quoted by Du Hamel poses for him. Moreover, in Descartes the concept of eminent containment had been one of the principal vehicles of his scenario of radical divine deception. After all, God too eminently contained the perfections needed to bring about the objective reality that is contained in our ideas of material things. Consequently, the objective reality of those ideas could be causally accounted for by God, even if no material things existed formally. Surely, Régis could not deny that Descartes had taken seriously such a scenario of divine deception. And this raises the question how Régis himself deals with the sceptical challenge that it poses.

Fortunately, Régis explicitly discusses a scenario of divine deception at the beginning of his “Logique”. There, indeed, he ventures that a scenario of radical divine deception is intrinsically contradictory. As I will suggest in the next paragraphs, it is here that Régis may be relying on the creation doctrine that he inherits from Desgabets more than he is willing to explicitly acknowledge. Here is Régis’ claim to the effect that radical divine deception is inconceivable:

Mais peut-estre que je raisonne mal, quand je conclus que la propriété que mon idée a de représenter l’étenduë, vient de l’étenduë même comme de sa cause: car qu’est-ce qui m’empêche de croire que si cette propriété ne vient pas de moy, elle ne vienne au moins d’un esprit supérieur au mien, qui produit en moy l’idée de l’étenduë, bien que l’étenduë ne soit pas actuellement existante. Toutefois, quand j’y fais réflexion, je vois bien que ma conséquence est bonne, et qu’un esprit, quelque excellent qu’il soit, ne peut faire que l’idée que j’ay de l’étenduë me représente l’étenduë plutôt qu’une autre chose, si l’étenduë n’existe pas; parce que s’il le faisoit, l’idée de l’étenduë ne seroit pas une représentation de l’étenduë, mais une représentation du Neant, ce qui est impossible (Régis, 1691a: I, 75).¹⁸

It is impossible even for God to give me an idea of extension if no extension exists. For in that case, my alleged idea of extension would be an idea of nothingness, rather than of extension. And it is impossible that there be a representation of nothingness. Taken at face value, this argument is hardly convincing. After all, to say that a given idea is a representation of nothingness might mean two things: a) the idea has no external correlate; b) the idea has no content. It seems that b, but not a, is absurd. Yet, if God would create an idea of extension in my mind even though no extension exists, it seems that a would be true of that idea, not b. Even though the idea would have no external correlate, it would still have “extension” as its content. But that means that nothing obviously absurd or impossible would follow from Régis’ scenario of divine deception.

Of course, 2 says that if no extension ever existed, “extension” could not be the content of any idea. But Régis cannot appeal to 2 in criticizing the above scenario of divine deception. After all, 2 is precisely what that scenario challenges: the words “peut-estre que je raisonne mal” follow immediately after Régis has used 2 to derive his anti-sceptical conclusion. So is there any way in which Régis can maintain that “extension” cannot be the content of a given idea if extension does not exist without begging the question? In concluding this section, I will suggest that Régis’ metaphysics of creation might provide an answer here.

¹⁸ Cf. Régis, 1691a: I, 77.

Régis' view on creation was deeply influenced by the writings of Robert Desgabets. Desgabets had radicalized Descartes' voluntarism, according to which God freely established the eternal truths. According to Desgabets, not only did God freely establish the eternal truths, he also freely determined what is possible or even so much as conceivable: "[A]vant le décret de Dieu, il n'y avait ni réalité, ni vérité, ni même conceptibilité ou de nominabilité" (Desgabets, 1983-1985: 80). But what does it mean to say that possibilities and "conceivabilities" depend on God's decree? According to Desgabets, it meant that possibilities and conceivabilities were part of God's free creation. Indeed, as he put it in his *Traité de l'indéfectibilité des créatures*, what is not created is not possible or even conceivable: "Tout a été fait d'un seul coup, et ce qui n'a point été produit cette première fois est demeuré absolument impossible, inconcevable et innominable (29)".¹⁹ In Régis' *Système* and especially in his *L'usage de la raison et de la foi* of 1704, one finds much the same position. As in Desgabets, the limits of God's creation set the boundaries for what is so much as conceivable. In *L'usage*, Régis tells us that "la conceptibilité est une propriété de l'être, et qu'elle le suppose nécessairement, et par conséquent qu'il est impossible de penser à ce qui n'auroit aucun degré d'être, d'essence, ou d'existence" (Régis, 1996: 264).

These are "radical" positions indeed. And with regard to conceivable substances, Desgabets and Régis are truly uncompromising: in any substance that can be conceived of, essence and existence coincide. To be essentially existent, then, no longer is a divine prerogative for Desgabets (1983-1985: 263) and Régis (1996: 260). But two nuances are in place. First, Desgabets and Régis do not believe that, just because we can conceive of a yet-to-be-built house, it already exists. Rather, my future house is part of creation in the minimal sense that it is contained as a possible modification in material substance. Borrowing from scholastic terminology, Desgabets and Régis say that possible but not actually existent modifications of a substance have a "being of essence" that is grounded in that substance, but not a "being of existence" (see Desgabets, 1983-1985: 81-82 and Régis, 1996: 263).²⁰ Second, though they say that what is conceivable must somehow exist, Régis and Desgabets specify that conceptions that have been contaminated by (implicit) judgments need not have extramental correlates. Thus, when I form an idea of a material God or of a mermaid, I

¹⁹ Cf. Desgabets (1983-1985): 231-232 and 245.

²⁰ On the *esse essentiae* in scholastic debates between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, see Hoffmann, 2002.

(implicitly and) erroneously judge that two ideas (“matter” and “God”, or “female upper body” and “fishtail”) belong together. Therefore, my ideas of a material God and of a mermaid need not have external correlates (see Régis, 1692: 19-20).²¹

To be sure, the creation-doctrines in Desgabets and Régis raise many more questions. Answering them in order to further explore the subtleties of these doctrines here would take us too far afield. The importance that these theories have for present purposes consists in that they may help us understand Régis’ dismissal of the above scenario of divine deception. For taking seriously these theories urges a mitigation of the contrast between a and b. After all, what is in no way part of creation is not conceivable either. Thus, if God had not created extension – if he had not given it its being – it would be impossible to conceive of extension. After all, “la conceptibilité est une propriété de l’être”. Hence, having an idea of extended substance while no extension exists would be much like conceiving of the inconceivable. It would be much like having a representation with no content indeed. It would be like having “une représentation du Neant” in a sense that is truly absurd. One can see, then, why Régis should confidently face the threat of divine deception by claiming that it is not a cogent scenario.

Conclusion

In his *Système de Philosophie*, Pierre-Sylvain Régis claimed that he could prove the existence of material beings just by reflecting on the nature of his ideas. This proof, he said, was both simple and strong. By building on Descartes and his *Méditations*, scepticism could be countered. But Régis’ argument has been criticized. According to Du Hamel and Wells, it misconstrued and oversimplified Cartesian concepts, which weakened the strength of Régis’ proof. I have argued that, whether or not Régis’ usage of “objective being” is genuinely different from Descartes’, the problem that Wells raises for Régis can to some extent be deflected. If, like Arnauld, Régis thinks that the mental modification that represents x to me somehow realizes x itself, a rationale behind Régis’ inference from (1) the perfections of an effect cannot go beyond those of its cause, to (2) the idea of x for its objective being is dependent upon an actually existent exemplary cause that formally contains all the perfections of x emerges.

²¹ For discussion of Desgabets, see Cook, 2002.

But this does not solve all problems. Indeed, it might still be objected that the perfections of x are eminently contained in my mind or even in God. Thus, both God and my mind could turn out to be plausible candidates for the objective being of my idea of x . This problematic was brought to Régis' attention by Du Hamel. Régis tried to explain away the passages from Descartes that Du Hamel had adduced, but his attempt does not seem overly successful. Since the possibility that God eminently contains the perfections needed to cause the objective reality of my ideas makes possible a scenario of divine deception, the question arose how Régis deals with such scenarios. I have argued that Régis' answer to such sceptical challenges may be stronger than appears at first sight. I suggested that his rejection of a scenario of divine deception in the *Système* may be undergirded by the metaphysics of creation that Régis to a large extent inherited from Desgabets. As this metaphysics is rich and complex indeed, this means that Régis anti-scepticism may not be quite as simple as he himself appears to think it is.

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