

# Material Falsity and Error in Descartes' Meditations

Cecilia Wee



**Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group

# Material Falsity and Error in Descartes's *Meditations*

Descartes's account of material falsity constitutes one of the most difficult and challenging areas in his work. Yet understanding the account is crucial to understanding his views on such important issues as representation, truth, falsehood and human error. This book is a sustained exploration of material falsity and its importance to Descartes's overall philosophy.

Cecilia Wee here approaches Descartes's *Meditations* as an intellectual journey, wherein Descartes's views develop and change as he makes new discoveries about self, God and matter. This is the first book to focus closely on Descartes's notion of material falsity, and it shows how his account of material falsity – and correspondingly his account of crucial notions such as truth, falsehood and error – evolves according to epistemic advances in the *Meditations*. The book also offers important new insights on the crucial role of Descartes's Third Meditation discussion of material falsity in advancing many subsequent arguments in the *Meditations*.

The book begins with an overview of recent views on Cartesian material falsity. Drawing on Suárez's work, it offers an account of key features of the Cartesian materially false idea, and the relation between such ideas and false judgments. Descartes's account of material falsity is shown to be 'dynamic', with the criteria for determining material falsity in an idea changing according to epistemic advances in the *Meditations*, and with Descartes's discussion of material falsity contributing to these advances. *Material Falsity and Error in Descartes' Meditations* traces how this discussion crucially underpins the Third Meditation proofs of God's existence, and the account of error and theodicy in the Fourth and Sixth Meditations, leading to a revisionist account of Descartes's ethics.

Cecilia Wee is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at the National University of Singapore. Her research interests are Descartes and early modern philosophy.

# Routledge Studies in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy

## **The Soft Underbelly of Reason**

The passions in the seventeenth century

*Edited by Stephen Gaukroger*

## **Descartes and Method**

A search for a method in meditations

*Daniel E. Flage and Clarence A. Bonnen*

## **Descartes's Natural Philosophy**

*Edited by Stephen Gaukroger, John Schuster and John Sutton*

## **Hobbes and History**

*Edited by G. A. J. Rogers and Tom Sorell*

## **The Philosophy of Robert Boyle**

*Peter R. Anstey*

## **Descartes**

Belief, scepticism and virtue

*Richard Davies*

## **The Philosophy of John Locke**

New perspectives

*Edited by Peter R. Anstey*

## **Receptions of Descartes**

Cartesianism and Anti-Cartesianism in Early Modern Europe

*Edited by Tad M. Schmaltz*

## **Material Falsity and Error in Descartes's *Meditations***

*Cecilia Wee*

# Material Falsity and Error in Descartes' *Meditations*

Cecilia Wee

First published 2006  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

© 2006 Cecilia Wee

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2006.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge’s collection of thousands of eBooks please go to [www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk](http://www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk).”

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN10 0-415-34984-2 (Print Edition)

ISBN13 9-780-415-34984-0

For Annette Baier,  
and for my children, Sarah and Matthew Lim



# Contents

<i>Abbreviations</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
1 An Introduction to Descartes's Materially False Ideas	1
2 'Static' Interpretations of Materially False Ideas – A Survey	12
3 A 'Dynamic' Interpretation of Materially False Ideas	29
4 The Metaphysical Status of Material Falsity (and of Error)	77
5 Falsehood, Error and Ethics	112
6 Conclusion	151
<i>Notes</i>	153
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	161
<i>Index</i>	166

# Abbreviations

## Abbreviations for frequently cited primary texts

AT x: y	<i>Oeuvres de Descartes</i> , volume x: page y
CSM x: y	<i>The Philosophical Writings of Descartes</i> (I and II) volume x: page y
CSMK: y	<i>The Philosophical Writings of Descartes</i> (III): page y
DM x, y: z	<i>Disputationes Metaphysicae</i> , disputation x, section y: paragraph z
CD x: y	<i>De Civitate Dei</i> , book x, chapter y
SCG x: y, z	<i>Summa contra Gentiles</i> , book x: chapter y, section z

## Frequently used abbreviations

ACP	Accurate Causal Portrayal account of representation
AA	The alternative account of representation (to ACP)
ideas <sub>m</sub>	Ideas taken in the material sense
ideas <sub>o</sub>	Ideas taken in the objective sense
ISOs	Ideas of sensible objects (mentioned in the proof of the existence of the external world in the <i>Meditations</i> )
judgements <sub>p</sub>	Proper judgements (i.e. judgements made by the will)
judgements <sub>q</sub>	Quasi-judgements (i.e. 'judgements' of the intellect)
PEWM	Descartes's proof of the existence of the external world in the <i>Meditations</i>
PEWP	Descartes's proof of the existence of the external world in the <i>Principles of Philosophy</i>
TMD	Descartes's key Third Meditation discussion of material falsity (found at AT 7:43–55, CSM 2:29–31)

# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Annette Baier, Kim-chong Chong, John Greenwood, Michael Pelczar and C.L. Ten for their helpful comments on various portions, and versions, of the manuscript. I am also grateful to the three anonymous referees for Routledge for their very useful comments and suggestions for improving the book. Parts of the book are based on my Ph.D. dissertation, and I thank the dissertation committee – Annette, Joseph Camp, Jr., Stephen Engstrom, Gerald Massey and J.E. McGuire – for their incisive proddings and probings with respect to the original chapters. Lisa Shapiro provided helpful comments on the finished dissertation, and Amy Schmitter kindly let me have chapters from her own dissertation, which shed light on issues that I was dealing with in mine.

I have of course benefited immensely from reading the work of many Cartesian scholars and commentators, too numerous to name. Writers such as Margaret Wilson, Anthony Kenny, Harry Frankfurt and Lilli Alanen provided me with an early induction into Descartes's views in my first year in graduate school. Since then, many other writers on Descartes have provided many hours of pleasure and reflection. Although there might be the occasional disagreement, I certainly could not have written this book without the framework that such writers have provided for thinking about the issues.

Some of the earlier research for this book was presented in the form of articles and a colloquium paper. 'Descartes's Two Proofs of the External World' appeared in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, and I thank the editor of the journal and Oxford University Press for permission to reprint a revised version in the first half of Chapter 4. The second half of Chapter 4 is a slightly amended form of 'Material Falsity and the Arguments for God's Existence in Descartes's *Meditations*', which appeared in *Persons and Passions: Essays in Honor of Annette Baier*, edited by J. Jenkins, J. Whiting and C. Williams. I thank the University of Notre Dame Press for permission to reprint the paper. A revised version of 'Self, Other and Community in Cartesian Ethics', which appeared in the *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, is found in the latter half of Chapter 5, and I am grateful to the executive editor of the journal for permission to reprint it. An extremely condensed version of Chapter 3 was read as a colloquium paper at the APA Eastern Division meeting in Washington, DC in 1998. I thank the commentator, Vere Chappell, and the participants for their lively and helpful comments.

x *Acknowledgements*

My colleagues in the philosophy department at the National University of Singapore have provided a congenial environment for the discussion of philosophy, and the writing of this book. I especially thank Kim-chong Chong and C.L. Ten, who, as heads of department, have been encouraging, patient and supportive. Further afield, the editors at Routledge, Terry Clague and James (Joe) Whiting and their team, have been supportive and prompt in providing useful advice.

This book could not have been completed without family support. My parents, and my sister and her family, have always been there for us over the years. It takes a village to raise a child, and I thank my parents-in-law and Muntamah for taking good care of our two children when we are at work. My husband John has been an enduring source of support, and has helped me to juggle work and family by juggling them himself.

This book is for my children, Sarah and Matthew, whose presence has made all the difference. It is also for Annette Baier, who has been an inspiring example of how to be a philosopher, but amidst all one's philosophy, to be still a woman.

# 1 An Introduction to Descartes's Materially False Ideas

## The importance of materially false ideas in Descartes's philosophy

Descartes distinguishes between two types of falsity in his *Meditations* – formal falsity and material falsity. In the Third Meditation, he points out that formal falsity is a feature of judgements. However, he comes to own later that there is ‘another kind of falsity’ – material falsity – which applies to ideas.

The argument presented in this book is that Descartes's account of falsehood and error can best be understood through an examination of his account of material falsity in ideas. While Descartes thinks that ideas cannot be ‘strictly speaking’ false, he also thinks that ideas that are materially false somehow provide ‘material’ for false judgements and error. What Descartes says about such ideas indicates that these ideas provide such material for error because they somehow fail in their representational function. An account of materially false ideas would thus involve an examination of precisely how they fail in this function. This requires one to deal with issues such as: What are the objects represented by such ideas? In what sense do these ideas fail to represent such objects? How exactly does such failure in representation lead to the making of false judgements, and hence to error? In answering these questions, one comes to a thorough understanding of the nature of Cartesian truth and falsehood, and of the elements that are involved in the making of true and false judgements.

An understanding of material falsity in ideas is thus essential for an understanding of how false judgements, and hence epistemic error, come about. The account of material falsity in ideas also helps illuminate the account of error in another way. A close examination of Descartes's account of material falsity reveals important features of his view on the metaphysical status of error and falsity. This in turn is directly relevant to understanding the precise structure of the much-discussed Third Meditation proof(s) of God's existence. It also helps illuminate Descartes's views on how human error is possible within the context of his theodicy. Recognizing how and why human error takes place within the Cartesian theodicy will reorient one's perspective of the issues at stake in the Fourth Meditation treatment of error. It also serves to make sense of Descartes's somewhat neglected discussion of the ‘true errors of nature’ in the Sixth Meditation, and offers insight into Descartes's ethical views.

## 2 *Descartes's Materially False Ideas*

In short, a sustained attempt to understand Descartes's account of materially false ideas by reference to the wider context of the *Meditations*, and conversely, an attempt to trace the impact of this account on the subsequent argument of the *Meditations*, will yield useful insights into Descartes's overall account of falsehood and error, as well as into his ethics. But an enterprise of this sort is relatively rare in the literature. Writers who offer a more general explication of Descartes's views seldom accord his account of materially false ideas very detailed consideration. Materially false ideas are often either briefly discussed by such commentators<sup>1</sup> or not mentioned at all.<sup>2</sup> One dictionary on Descartes (Cottingham 1993) does not include materially false ideas as an entry; and a recent book on human error in Descartes (Tierno 1997) does not mention them.

Conversely, commentators who embark on a detailed examination of Descartes's account of materially false ideas have tended to consider it in relative isolation from the rest of his views. This is to some extent because the account in itself presents a major intellectual challenge: it is obscure in the extreme, and it is not clear that it is entirely coherent. Most commentary on the issue thus focuses primarily on *making sense* of Descartes's account of material falsity. Seldom is any attempt made to address explicitly the issues of *why* it is important that one make sense of the notion, or *why* the notion is brought into play in the *Meditations* at all.

This book aims to locate the account of material falsity both within the wider account of error by Descartes, and within his views as a whole. Before one can do this, however, one needs to first understand his position on materially false ideas. The latter, as commentators who have examined the issue make clear, is indeed a challenge. Descartes's account of materially false ideas has been described as 'exceptionally difficult to understand' (Wilson 1990: 2), and 'a headache . . . if not a plain inconsistency' (Beysade 1992: 5).

### **The challenges posed by Descartes's account of materially false ideas**

Descartes specifically discusses materially false ideas only in the *Meditations*, and the accompanying Objections and Replies. In the Third Meditation, Descartes gives his first specific account of materially false ideas. The theologian and philosopher Antoine Arnauld (1612–1694) then criticizes this account in the Fourth Set of Objections, and Descartes defends his views in the Fourth Set of Replies.

### **Descartes's account of materially false ideas in the Third Meditation**

At the beginning of the Third Meditation, Descartes tries to classify his thoughts and to determine which of them might properly be said to be 'bearers of truth and falsity' (AT 7: 37, CSM 2: 25). He finds that some of his thoughts are 'as-if images of things' (*tanquam rerum imagines*) – for example, when he thinks of 'a man, or a chimera, or the sky, or an angel, or God'. Only these thoughts strictly qualify as 'ideas'; and insofar as they are 'considered solely in themselves and are not referred to anything else', they cannot 'strictly speaking' be false.

Then there are other thoughts with 'additional forms':

Other thoughts have various additional forms: thus when I will or am afraid, or affirm, or deny, there is always a particular thing which I take as the object of my thought, but my thought includes something more than the likeness of that thing. Some thoughts in this category are called volitions or emotions, while others are called judgements.

(AT 7: 37, CSM 2: 25–6)

Thus, such thoughts include an idea (say, of a lion) with an additional form (of fear, or desire, or judgement) towards the object of the idea. Descartes maintains that 'one need not worry about falsity' in the thoughts that involve volitions and emotions. As he points out, 'even if the things I may desire are wicked or even non-existent, that does not make it any less true that I desire them'. Thus, he concludes that 'the only remaining thoughts where I must be on my guard against making a mistake are judgements' (AT 7: 37, CSM 2: 26). It appears then that the only thoughts which are 'bearers of truth and falsity' are judgements.

A couple of pages later, however, Descartes qualifies this view. Upon subjecting his 'ideas of corporeal things' to scrutiny, he concludes that

The things which I perceive clearly and distinctly in them are very few in number. The list comprises size, or extension in length, breadth and depth; shape, which is a function of the boundaries of this extension; position, which is a relation between various items possessing shape; and motion, or change in position . . . But as for all the rest, . . . I think of these only in a very confused and obscure way, to the extent that I do not even know whether they are true or false, that is, whether the ideas I have of them are ideas of real things or no things.

(AT 7: 43, CSM 2: 30)\*<sup>3</sup>

After dividing his ideas of corporeal things into these two classes, he then significantly states:

For although, as I have noted before, falsity in the strict sense, or formal falsity, can only occur in judgements, there is another kind of falsity, material falsity which occurs in ideas when they represent no things as things.

(AT 7: 43, CSM 2: 30)\*

Descartes admits now that, although falsity 'in the strict sense' occurs only in judgements, there is a certain kind of falsity which applies to ideas (as opposed to judgements) – that is, material falsity. Such falsity occurs when ideas 'represent no things as things'.

He then uses a pair of 'confused and obscure' ideas – the opposing ideas of heat and cold – to illustrate material falsity in ideas:

For example, the ideas that I have of heat and cold contain so little clarity and distinctness that they do not enable me to tell whether cold is merely the privation

#### 4 Descartes's Materially False Ideas

(*privatio*) of heat or vice versa, or whether both of them are real qualities, or neither is. And since there are no ideas which are not as-if of things, if it is true that cold is nothing but the privation of heat, the idea which represents it to me as something real and positive deserves to be called false, and the same goes for other ideas of this kind.

(AT 7: 43–44, CSM 2: 30)\*

Descartes had said that all ideas are 'as-if images of things', that is, an idea purports to be *of* a thing. But suppose, for instance, cold is really a privation or absence of heat. Then the idea which presents cold as if of a thing is materially false: it presents cold as if it is a thing, when cold is really a thing's absence, not a thing at all.

One of Descartes's concerns in the Third Meditation is to search for means by which he may trace the source or cause of his various ideas. His materially false ideas, he adds, are seen by 'the natural light' to 'proceed (*procedere*) from nothing', and to have their source in defect and imperfection in himself:

if [my ideas] are false, that is, represent no things, I know by the natural light that they proceed from nothing – that is, they are in me only because of a deficiency and lack of perfection in my nature.

(AT 7: 43–44, CSM 2: 30)\*

While Descartes does mention materially false ideas briefly in a later passage in the Third Meditation (AT 7: 46, CSM 2: 31), the extended passage outlined above clearly presents his key doctrines concerning material falsity in ideas – at least as they stand at the point of the Third Meditation. For convenience (and to distinguish it from the later brief mention of material falsity at AT 7: 46), I shall refer henceforth to this extended Third Meditation discussion of material falsity as TMD.

#### Arnauld's Fourth Set of Objections

Descartes's attempt to attribute (material) falsity to ideas was criticized by Arnauld in the Fourth Set of Objections. Arnauld argued that it was 'inconsistent with the author's own principles'. He maintained that the notion that ideas could be materially false was incompatible with what Descartes had earlier said about the nature of ideas.

As mentioned, Descartes had said that all ideas are as-if images of things. Insofar as they are as-if images of things, they have what Margaret Wilson calls 'representational character' (Wilson 1978: 102). That is, an idea presents itself as if it is *of* a certain thing, and hence as a representation *of* that thing.

Just prior to his extended Third Meditation discussion on material falsity, Descartes had pointed out that ideas have different levels of objective reality according to what they present themselves as being of, and hence as representations of. He writes:

But insofar as different ideas . . . represent different things, it is clear that they differ widely. Undoubtedly, the ideas which represent substances to me amount

to something more and, so to speak, contain within themselves more objective reality than the ideas which merely represent modes or accidents. Again, the idea that gives me my understanding of a supreme God, eternal, infinite, omniscient, omnipotent and the creator of all things that exist apart from him, certainly has in it more objective reality than the ideas that represent finite substances.

(AT 7: 40, CSM 2: 28)

Insofar as ideas are representations of different things, they contain or have different levels of objective reality. For example, an idea that presents itself as being of a finite substance has more objective reality than an idea that presents itself as being of a mode or accident.

Arnauld (not unjustifiably) took these passages to mean that the objective reality in an idea is *determined* by what is presented by the idea. For example, my idea of a finite substance has a certain level of objective reality in virtue of its presenting itself as being *of* a finite substance. Arnauld argued that, as the objective reality in an idea is determined by what the idea presents to me, there can never be a materially false idea. Thus, he writes:

if cold is a privation, it cannot exist objectively in the intellect by means of an idea whose objective existence is a positive entity. Therefore, if cold is merely a privation, there cannot ever be a positive idea of it, and hence there cannot be an idea which is materially false.

(AT 7: 206, CSM 2: 145)\*

Arnauld points out that, if what is presented in my idea of cold is a privation or absence, then this idea of cold cannot be an idea of a positive thing. The idea, in presenting a privation, cannot ever have an (objective) reality *derived from what it presents*. We cannot have a materially false idea – an idea which represents no thing as a thing – because such an idea would have to both present a privation, and yet exhibit a positive reality derived from what it presents. There is thus no room for material falsity in ideas.

Arnauld emphasizes that his objection does not concern the issue of how an idea might represent an existing, actual object. Rather, he is concerned with the representative character *within the idea itself*, in virtue of what it presents to the thinker:

[That there cannot ever be a materially false idea] is confirmed by the very argument which the author uses to prove that the idea of an infinite being cannot but be a true idea, since, *though I can pretend that such a being does not exist, I cannot pretend that the idea of such a being does not represent anything real to me.*

The same can plainly be said of any positive idea. For *although it can be imagined that cold, which I suppose to be represented by a positive idea, is not something positive, it cannot be imagined that the idea does not represent anything real and positive to me.* For an idea is called 'positive' not in virtue of the existence it has as a mode of thinking (for in that sense all ideas would be called positive), but in

## 6 *Descartes's Materially False Ideas*

virtue of the objective existence which it contains and which it represents to our mind. Hence the idea may perhaps not be the idea of cold, but it cannot be a false idea.

(AT 7: 206, CSM 2: 145, emphases mine)

A rejoinder that one might be tempted to make to his criticisms, Arnauld points out, is this: since my idea (which represents cold as real to me) is not an idea which correctly represents actual cold, it is thereby a false idea. He responds that this solution involves a confusion between the role played by judgements, and by ideas:

But, you may reply, [the idea of cold-as-positive] is false precisely because it is not the idea of [actual] cold. *No: it is your judgement that is false, if you judge that it is the idea of cold. The idea itself, within you, is completely true.* In the same way, the idea of God should never be called false – not even 'materially false', even though someone may transfer it to something which is not God, as idolaters have done.

(AT 7: 207, CSM 2: 145–46, emphasis mine)

Finally, Arnauld points out that Descartes's view that his positive (mistaken) idea of cold 'proceed(s) from nothing' is incompatible with what he had maintained earlier in the Third Meditation. Descartes had earlier concluded in that Meditation that 'something cannot proceed from nothing' (AT 7: 40, CSM 2: 28). Arnauld argues that this principle is incompatible with what Descartes maintains about the origin of his (mistaken) idea of cold as positive:

Again, what is the cause of the positive objective being which according to you is responsible for the idea's being materially false? 'The cause is myself' you may answer, 'in so far as I come from nothing.' But *in that case, the positive objective being of an idea can come from nothing, which violates the author's most important principles.*

(AT 7: 40, CSM 2: 28, emphasis mine)

### *Descartes's answer in the Fourth Set of Replies*

Descartes's response to Arnauld's criticisms in the Fourth Set of Replies seems obscure in the extreme. On first reading it, one might be forgiven for thinking that Descartes had indeed been guilty earlier of incoherent thought, and was attempting to waffle his way out of it. Margaret Wilson describes his attempt to refute Arnauld's charges as a 'model of confusion confounded' (Wilson 1978: 110).

To begin with, the very first sentence in Descartes's reply to Arnauld on this issue seems to mark a shift from Descartes's earlier position. For, whereas Descartes had roundly asserted in TMD that ideas are materially false insofar as they 'represent nothings as things', he now appears to have softened his stance, maintaining more generally that they are false merely insofar as they provide 'material (*materia*) for error':

The first point [that Arnauld deals with] is that certain ideas are materially false. As I interpret this claim, it means that the ideas are such as to provide material for error.

(AT 7: 231, CSM 2: 162)\*

Dealing with the issue in further detail, Descartes then goes on to suggest that Arnauld's criticisms are misdirected, because Arnauld is looking at ideas 'taken in the formal sense', whereas Descartes is dealing with ideas in quite another sense. However, Descartes's attempt to illuminate the differences between his and Arnauld's perspective on the nature of ideas is anything but helpful:

When M. Arnauld says 'if cold is merely a privation, there cannot be an idea of cold which represents it as a positive thing', it is clear that he is dealing solely with an idea taken in the *formal* sense. Since ideas are forms of a kind, and are not composed of any matter, when we think of them as representing something we are not taking them *materially* but *formally*. If however we were considering them as not representing this or that but simply as operations of the intellect, then it could be said that we are taking them materially, but in that case they would have no reference to the truth or falsity of their objects. So I think that the only sense in which an idea is materially false is the one which I have explained. Thus, whether cold is a positive thing or a privation does not affect the idea I have of it, which remains the same as it always was. It is this idea, I claim, which can provide material for error if it is true that cold is a privation and does not have as much reality as heat; for if I consider the ideas of cold and heat just as I received them from my senses, I am unable to tell that one idea represents more reality than the other.

(AT 7: 232, CSM 2: 162–3)\*

This passage, once again, appears perilously close to a backtrack. Descartes in the Third Meditation had asserted that materially false ideas are false in virtue of the fact that they 'represent no things as things'. But Descartes now maintains that whenever 'we think of ideas as representing something, we are taking them formally, not materially'. It appears, then, all ideas *insofar as we think of them as representational* are ideas in the formal sense. Moreover, Descartes concedes to Arnauld that these ideas, taken formally, can never be materially false (for he says that Arnauld's criticisms against the possibility of material falsity would be valid if Descartes were looking at ideas in the formal sense). But if ideas insofar as they are seen as representational are ideas in the formal sense, and ideas in the formal sense can never be materially false, it follows that ideas insofar as they are seen as representational can never be materially false. How then can one have materially false ideas – in other words, ideas that are taken as representational (as 'representing no things as things') and are materially false precisely because they represent wrongly?

Now, it seems, Descartes has to make space for material falsity in ideas after this concession to Arnauld that one can never have ideas that are materially false in the sense that they represent wrongly. A glance at his subsequent account of material

## 8 Descartes's Materially False Ideas

falsity again reinforces the suspicion that he does this by withdrawing from his earlier definition of it. For now Descartes no longer maintains that the idea of cold would be materially false if it represents no thing as a thing; instead, he notes that the idea of cold is 'materially false' merely because, if he considers his ideas of heat and cold 'just as I received them from my senses', he is 'unable to tell' if one represents more reality to him than the other (AT 7: 232–3, CSM 2: 163). Wilson points out that Descartes now thinks that an idea is materially false, not in virtue of its content representing wrongly, but in virtue of its content being obscure:

[M]y critic asks what the idea of cold, which I described as materially false, represents to me. If it represents a privation, he says, it is true; and if it represents a positive entity, then it is not the idea of cold. This is right; but my only reason for calling the idea 'materially false' is that, *owing to the fact that it is obscure and confused, I am unable to judge whether or not what it represents to me is something positive which exists outside of my sensation*. And hence I may be led to *judge* that it is something positive though in fact it may merely be a privation . . .

(AT 7: 234, CSM 2: 164, emphases mine)

Whereas Descartes had earlier said that it is the (materially false) idea itself that represents wrongly, he now appears to have accepted Arnauld's point that it is the judgement that decides wrongly what the idea represents. The idea, say, of cold is merely obscure and confused. It is one's judgement that makes the mistake when it decides that the idea represents something positive.

Wilson has succinctly expressed some of the (apparent) difficulties that Descartes gets himself into by trying to avoid the criticism levelled by Arnauld:

Now in the Fourth Replies, ideas are said to be materially false *merely* because they are obscure – not because they represent *nullas res tanquam res* . . . This must, I think, be viewed as a significant departure from the doctrine of the *Meditations*. And while it may get Descartes out of one difficulty [i.e. that mentioned by Arnauld], it does get him into another. For now the *same feature* of ideas, their 'obscurity', is being assigned the tasks of explaining *both* why I 'cannot tell' whether or not the idea exhibits something real, and why I judge that it does. Further, even if we were able somehow to resolve the appearance of inconsistency on this point, we are left with a very weak 'explanation' of our false judgements concerning the qualities of objects. For, while the representational character of ideas was said in the *Meditations* actually to mislead us on the matter of objective reality, the 'obscurity' of ideas can be said only to provide an 'occasion' or opportunity for error.

(1978: 115–16)

In sum, Wilson sees two difficulties with Descartes's account. First, if the idea's obscurity is to explain why one is unclear about whether it represents anything real, then how can such obscurity also explain why it *misleads* one into judging that it