Are there beings of reason? This question appears in the title of the first section of the fifty-fourth of Francisco Suárez’s *Metaphysical Disputations* (DM). At this point in the *Metaphysical Disputations*, all we know is that beings of reason are not real (DM 1.1.4–6, XXV, 3a–4a; 54, prol.1, XXVI, 1015a). So the first question of DM 54.1 is this: are there beings that are not real? At first glance this question seems absurd. If something is a being, how could it fail to be real? The first position reported by Suárez takes just this line. According to this negative position, a being of reason is made up [*fictum*], just as Pegasus is made up. But clearly such things do not have being: “it is a contradiction to say that there is such a being, since what is only made up [*fingitur*] does not have being [*non est*]” (DM 54.1.2, XXVI, 1015b).1

But there are also reasons to say that there are things that are not real, things that are only made up. The primary argument in support of what I will call the positive position (‘realist’ will not do, since beings of reason are by definition not real) is that “the properties of being apply to beings of reason, for a being of reason is one or many, and it is intelligible, etc.” (DM 54.1.3, XXVI, 1016a).2 This one-line argument can be read in several ways. It can be read as affirming that beings of

---

1. The negative position seems to have been a minority position. Suárez attributes it to one Antonio Bernardi della Mirandola (1503–1565), and he says that Francisco Mayrone (d. ca. 1328) defends the negative position for the sake of argument. As far as I can tell, Mirandola does not discuss beings of reason in his commentary on the *Categories* (*Institutio in universam logikam* [Rome, 1562]). For a critical edition of the relevant Mayrone text, see Nora Cubrová and Lukáš Novák, eds. (2006). Later Jesuits attribute the negative position to one Vallesius, *loco non invento*.

2. Suárez does not cite anyone in favor of this position. In his translation, Doyle suggests that Suárez has in mind Thomists such as Capreolus, Ferrara, and Soncinas (Doyle 1995: 60, fn. 14). However, it is not clear from their discussions of beings of reason that these authors endorsed the positive view as Suárez states it.
reason have properties such as being one and being intelligible; but
something must be to have properties; so, there are beings of reason.
Call this the characteristic argument for non-existents. Alternatively, the
argument could be read as affirming that there are truths about beings
of reason. For instance, it is true that a goat-stag is not a man-lion (so
they are many instead of one). But propositions are true only if some-
thing makes them true, and the only things capable of making it true
that a goat-stag is not a man-lion are the goat-stag and the man-lion.
Hence, there are such things as goat-stags and man-lions. Call this the
alethic argument for non-existents. Finally, the one-line argument can be
read as affirming that we can think about beings of reason—they are
intelligible—but one can’t think about something unless it is there to
be thought about. Hence, there are beings of reason. Call this the
intentionality argument for non-existents. The positive position alleges that
there are beings of reason in the same sense in which there are cats
and hats. Such items are needed as bearers of properties, as truthmak-
ers, and as intentional objects.

Suárez ends up endorsing a view that makes good on the insights
of both the negative position and the positive position. He agrees that
there is a sense in which ‘there are beings of reason’ is contradictory
and therefore false. But he also recognizes the power of the various
arguments for non-existent objects, especially the intentionality argu-
ment, and he develops a position according to which we can think
about non-existent objects. Suárez’s view of non-existents has re-
ceived some scholarly attention, but it has been either misrepresented
or not fully understood, in ways that will become clear as we proceed.
My aim in this paper is to establish what I take to be the definitive
features of Suárez’s view of nonexistent objects and demonstrate their
philosophical import. My main contention is twofold. First, Suárez
thinks that beings of reason do not exist, but they have being nonethe-
less. Suárez is therefore an ontological pluralist in that he recognizes
more than one way of being (§2). The main objection to ontological
pluralism in the contemporary literature is that, at best, it is a matter of
mere bookkeeping rather than ontology and, at worst, it is nonsense.

Suárez on Beings of Reason and Non-Strict Ontological Pluralism

My second main contention is that Suárez provides an interesting and
cogent response to this objection when arguing against ontological
monism (§3). Suárez’s response to this objection forces us to distin-
guish between two kinds of ontological pluralism: strict and non-strict.
In the end it will become clear that Suárez’s pluralism is non-strict.
Suárez’s pluralism presents a dialectical option not currently on the
menu of contemporary meta-metaphysics.

1. Suárez’s Remarks: An Exegetical Puzzle

My intention in this section is not to establish the ontological pluralist
reading but to present Suárez’s position in his own words. This will
set up and explain the exegetical puzzle that motivates much of the
current scholarship on Suárez’s position on beings of reason, a puzzle
that the ontological pluralist interpretation can solve, as explained in
the following section.

Suárez initially seems to affirm the positive position. The “true
opinion,” he tells us, is that “there are [dari] some beings of reason”
(DM 54.1.4, XXVI, 1016a). It is at this point that Suárez provides his
formal definition of a being of reason as “what has being only objecti-
vively in the intellect” (DM 54.1.6, XXVI, 1016b). I return below to this

3. I have encountered a surprising amount of resistance to my choice of translat-
ing dari as ‘there are’. I have two reasons for translating dari as ‘there are’. First,
the claim that there are [dari] beings of reason is supposed to be an answer to
the question whether there is [an sit] such a thing as a being of reason. Sec-
ond, Suárez often uses dari and esse interchangeably. For example: “Therefore,
unless he does not know what he is saying, no one can deny that there is
[dari] such a thing, made up by cognition alone, unless perhaps he is equivoco-
vating in his use of the verb dari or esse” (DM 54.1.7, XXVI 1017a). This claim
makes sense only if we assume that esse and dari are equivalent, for why else
would an equivocation on esse be relevant to the claim that there are [dari]
not beings of reason? Further, Suárez often makes ontological claims using
both esse and dari. For example, in his argument for the existence of God, he
uses both esse and dari to express the claim that God exists (DM 29). To those
who remain unconvinced, I say bear with me. What matters is the exegetical
puzzle generated below, and that puzzle can be generated without reliance
on the use of dari, since Suárez also says or implies passim that beings of rea-
son have being (esse).

4. The definition of a being of reason was the subject of some debate since the

BRIAN EMBRY
Suárez on Beings of Reason and Non-Strict Ontological Pluralism

For strictly speaking this proposition, ‘A chimera is not a being [est non ens];’ is true. Because if it is a fictitious being, it is therefore not a being. [DM 54.5.16, XXVI, 1035b]

Here Suárez clearly states that beings of reason do not have being and are not beings, thereby apparently endorsing the sort of contradiction imputed to the positive position by advocates of the negative position. For he endorses both (1) and (2):

(1) There are beings of reason.
(2) Beings of reason have no being.

We are therefore faced with an exegetical puzzle. What exactly is Suárez’s view of the ontological status of nonexistent objects? Are they beings or not? If so, what are we to make of Suárez’s insistence that they are not? If not, what are we to make of his insistence that there are such things?

2. The Ontological Pluralist Interpretation

Suárez himself provides the resources to resolve the apparent contradiction between (1) and (2). In support of his view, Suárez cites with approval Aristotle’s distinction between two kinds of being [duplicex esse]: “one which is truly in reality, and the other, which is not always in reality, but only in the apprehension of the mind” (DM 54.1.4, XXVI, 1016a).5 The first kind of being Suárez calls ‘real being,’ and the latter he calls ‘objective being’ (DM 54.2.3, XXVI, 1019a). As we know from above, beings of reason are not real, so they lack real being. But Suárez insists throughout DM 54 that beings of reason have objective being or, equivalently, they have being objectively. To take an especially clear

---

5. See also the Index locupletissimus, (4.2.2, XXV, xva): “We speak in two ways about being: in one way, as ‘being’ comprehends only true real beings. [...] In another way, as it extends to many things that truly and intrinsically are not beings, but are called beings only through a certain extrinsic attribution. Such are privations, and all beings per accidens or beings of reason.”
example, Suárez states, “Although a being of reason does not have real being, it does have objective being” (DM 54.2.3, XXVI, 1019a).

Suárez explicitly states that ‘being’ is predicated analogously of real beings and beings of reason and that we do not have a concept of being that applies to both (more on this claim below; DM 54.1.9–10, XXVI, 1017b–1018a). That is, ‘being’ has two different senses, and one sense applies to beings of reason, while another sense applies to real beings. So one way to resolve the apparent contradiction between (1) and (2) is to read them as expressing different senses of ‘being’:

(1a) Beings of reason have objective being.
(2a) Beings of reason do not have real being.

This reading dissolves the apparent contradiction between (1) and (2). Suárez himself disambiguates ontological claims in exactly the way I am suggesting. He writes:

When we say that there are [dari aut esse] beings of reason, we do not mean that they are in reality according to true existence, otherwise we would be involved in a contradiction. [...] Such beings are therefore said to be not simpliciter but in a respect, according to their capacity — namely, only objectively in the intellect. And so the matter is clear. [DM 54.1.7, XXVI, 1017a]

At this point Suárez has asserted:

(1) There are beings of reason,

but Suárez is aware of the fact that (1) is ambiguous between at least two readings:

(1a) Beings of reason have objective being,
(1b) Beings of reason exist.

Suárez notes that (1b) is self-contradictory when he clarifies: “we do not mean that they are in reality according to true existence, otherwise we would be involved in a contradiction” (DM 54.1.7, XXVI, 1017a).

Here he is assuming that a being of reason is by definition something that does not exist; hence, it would be contradictory to say that beings of reason, which do not exist, exist. Yet Suárez has also stated that (1) there are [dari aut esse] beings of reason. In the above passage, he explains that when he makes claims such as (1), we are to interpret him as meaning (1a). In exactly the same way and for exactly the same reasons, when Suárez makes claims such as (2), we are to interpret him as meaning (2a).

So on my reading, Suárez is an ontological pluralist insofar as he thinks there is more than one way of being. The ontological pluralist interpretation gives us everything we want in an interpretation of Suárez’s view of the ontological status of beings of reason. It comports fairly straightforwardly with the texts, and it accommodates the arguments for the positive position. For Suárez, there can be truths about beings of reason, thoughts about beings of reason, and properties of beings of reason, all because there is a sense in which there are beings of reason. Beings of reason do not exist, but they do have objective being.

In a recent entry into the literature on Suárez’s view of beings of reason, Christopher Shields (2012) argues that Suárez is an ontological monist, and beings of reason have no being whatsoever. When Suárez says that beings of reason have objective being, Shields interprets this as meaning simply that we can think about beings of reason, but it does not follow that beings of reason are there to be thought about. As I explain below, I think there is some truth to Shields’s interpretation, but I also think it is misleading insofar as it denies that Suárez is an ontological pluralist. I do not have the space to argue at length against Shields’s monist interpretation, but I take it that there is enough going for the ontological pluralist interpretation to warrant working out its details, to which I now turn.

6. A version of this interpretation is endorsed by Canteñs (2003) and Novotny (2013, 2015), and it is hinted at in Doyle (1987, 1988).
3. The Idle Hypothesis Objection

The ontological pluralist interpretation solves the exegetical puzzle introduced in Section 1, but it raises a new, philosophical problem about ontological pluralism itself. Some philosophers, like Peter van Inwagen (1977: 200a), profess not to understand ontological pluralism at all. Others say that ontological pluralism is “obfuscation” (Quine 1948: 23), “hallucinating” (Lewis 1990: 30), “gibberish or mere noise” (Lycan 1979: 290). There is one basic idea behind all of these objections. The worry is that ontological pluralism is an idle hypothesis because it is or can be made to be necessarily equivalent to ontological monism (McDaniel 2009; 2017, ch. 1). As a result, there is no reason to prefer ontological pluralism to ontological monism. To see this, consider an ontological monist position that Suárez himself takes to be an alternative view to his own. Suárez’s monist opponents deny that there are multiple ways of being and that there are multiple senses of ‘being’. The monist therefore says that there are beings of reason in the same sense in which there are cats and hats. For the monist, the difference between beings of reason and cats is not their ways of being but their properties: beings of reason are mind-dependent, say, but cats are not.

Suárez’s language can be made necessarily equivalent to the monist’s. This point is typically made nowadays in terms of quantifiers. Suárez uses quantifiers to express ontological claims, but he more often uses ontic predicates like ‘is’. Accordingly, I will formulate the objection in terms of ontic predicates. Suárez recognizes two specific ontic predicates — ‘objectively is’ and ‘really is’ — whereas his monist opponents recognize only one, which we can write, ‘generically is’. As McDaniel (2009; 2017, ch. 1) nicely shows in another context, Suárez can accept the ontological monist’s generic ontic predicate, defining it as a disjunction of his specific ontic predicates, as follows:

\[ x \text{ generically is } =_u x \text{ objectively is or } x \text{ really is} \]

And now Suárez can say everything the ontological monist can say. But the monist also can accept Suárez’s specific ontic predicates, defining them in terms of the generic ontic predicate and suitable other predicates, perhaps as follows:

\[ x \text{ objectively is } =_u x \text{ generically is and } x \text{ is mind-dependent} \]
\[ x \text{ really is } =_u x \text{ generically is and } x \text{ is not mind-dependent} \]

And now the monist can say everything that Suárez can say (even if they disagree about cases). This shows that while Suárez and the monist use a different language, they say the same thing. The only difference is that Suárez takes specific ontic predicates to be more semantically primitive than the generic ontic predicate, while the monist takes the generic ontic predicate to be semantically more primitive. But this appears to be a matter of bookkeeping, not a matter of philosophical import.

Fortunately, Suárez responds to this precise worry. It is easy to miss, but Suárez is fully aware of the threat from ontological monism, and he thinks he has a decisive reason to prefer ontological pluralism to ontological monism. In Suárez’s context, the ontological monist maintains that ‘being’ is univocal between cats and goat-stags. Suárez’s argument against this claim constitutes an argument for ontological pluralism and, a fortiori, a response to the idle hypothesis objection. To see how the argument goes, we must first have in mind a rough sketch of Suárez’s framework for thinking about semantic analogy.

Suárez takes for granted the standard scholastic framework for thinking about language.8 According to this framework, the terms of an artificial language like English or Latin are associated with or “subordinated to” concepts, which function as terms in a mental language. For Suárez, a term \( n \) in a spoken language is univocal just in case \( n \) is subordinated to a single, uniform concept (DM 28.3.2, XXVI, 13b; 28.3.21, XXVI, 21a). (It is not entirely clear how Suárez conceives of

---

7. Lycan uses these words to describe Meinongian quantification.

8. See Suárez, De anima 3.5–6, III, 630a–641a. For more sustained treatment of Suárez’s doctrine of the analogy of being as between various existents, see Ashworth (1995), Heider (2007), and Salas (2014).
a non-uniform concept, but for our purposes that will not matter.) A term \( n \) is equivocal just in case it is subordinated to multiple concepts by chance. For example, the Dutch word ‘bank’ is equivocal because it is subordinated by chance to the concept of a financial institution and to the concept of a piece of living room furniture. A spoken term \( n \) is analogical just in case (i) \( n \) is subordinated to a non-uniform concept, or (ii) \( n \) is subordinated to multiple concepts by design, due to an appropriate relationship between the signification of those concepts. The term ‘healthy’ is analogical in the second sense because it is subordinated by design to the concept a properly functioning biological state (as in a healthy cat) and to the concept of the power to bring about such a state (as in healthy food).

Now Suárez argues against the univocity of being as follows:

But a common concept [of being] has no place here, since such a concept requires that inferiors truly and intrinsically participate in the form signified by the name. But a being of reason cannot intrinsically participate in the being by which a being is said to be. [DM 54.1.10, XXVI, 1018a]

Here Suárez denies that there is a common concept of being that applies to cats and goat-stags alike. It follows that the natural language term ‘being’ (and its cognates) cannot be subordinated to a single, common concept of being. Hence, univocity is false. As a first pass, the argument appears to run as follows.

**Suárez’s argument against the univocity of being:**

1. If concept C is common to \( x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_n \), then C signifies a property intrinsic to \( x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_n \).

2. Being is not intrinsic to beings of reason.

3. Hence, there is no concept of being common to beings of reason and real beings.

4. Hence, ‘being’ is not predicated univocally of beings of reason and real beings.

Understanding this argument is absolutely crucial to understanding Suárez’s brand of ontological pluralism and the motivation behind it. It also turns out to be much more cogent than it at first appears to be. I will demonstrate this by a process of explanation and refinement, beginning with premise (2).

**3a. Intrinsic and Extrinsic Being**

Suárez explains the difference between existence and objective being in terms of intrinsicality and extrinsicality: existence is an intrinsic sort of being, and objective being is an extrinsic sort of being. Although it is easy to miss, this feature of the view is prominent in Suárez’s initial statement of his position:

But that which is thus objectively in the mind sometimes has or can have *in itself* true real being, according to which it is an object for reason, and this absolutely and simply is not a true being of reason but real. [...] But sometimes something is an object for or considered by reason that does not have another real or positive being *in itself* besides being an object for the intellect or reason thinking about it. [...] Therefore, ‘being of reason’ is correctly defined as that which has being only objectively in the intellect, or that which is cognized by reason as a being, even though it has no entity *in itself*. [...] Therefore, from this explanation of the word, which is also a definition of the thing signified (insofar as a definition is possible), it can obviously be gathered that there is something that can be called by the title of a being of reason. For many things

---

9. An example of this sort of analogy is ‘exists’, which somehow has enough structure built in to apply primarily to God, and then to substances, and then to accidents (DM 28.3.21, XXVI, 21a). How exactly this works remains a mystery that Suárez himself was unsure about.

10. Reading *intrinsec* with Vivès rather than *extrinsec* with the 1597 edition.
are conceived by our intellect that have no real being in
themselves. [My emphasis, DM 54.1.6–7, XXVI, 1016b]

Here Suárez states that beings of reason by definition have no being
in themselves. In other words, objective being is an extrinsic sort of be-
ing. In other places Suárez tells us that objective being is an extrinsic
denomination, while existence is an intrinsic denomination.\footnote{Examples of these claims abound in Suárez. For a start, see DM 54.2.11–12, XXVI, 1020b–1021a; 8.1.4, XXV, 276b; 31.1.2, XXVI, 225b; 32.2.14, XXVI, 323a. The claim that objective being is extrinsic does not make a prominent appear-
ance in many later Jesuit treatments of beings of reason, but Giuseppe Polizzi
attributes it to Suárez and argues at length for it (Philosophiarum disputatio-
um tomus primus de logica, d. 11, s. 5, pp. 133a–156a).}

For Suárez the notion of an extrinsic denomination does the work
of the contemporary notion of an extrinsic property, as opposed to
an intrinsic property.\footnote{For more examples, see Doyle (1984).} Examples of intuitively intrinsic properties include
being made of tin, being a human, and having negative charge. Ex-
amples of intuitively extrinsic properties include being a grandmother,
being Peter’s favorite coffee shop, and being thought about. Suárez’s
own examples of extrinsic denominations include being seen, being
loved, being to the left of a column, being clothed, being located in
Rome (DM 54.2.8–9, XXVI, 1020a), being married, being a buyer, and
being a seller (DM 54.6.6, XXVI, 1040b).\footnote{For Suárez the notion
of an extrinsic denomination does the work in virtue of
many later Jesuit treatments of beings of reason, but Giuseppe Polizzi
attributes it to Suárez and argues at length for it (Philosophiarum disputatio-
um tomus primus de logica, d. 11, s. 5, pp. 133a–156a).} So Suárez thinks that being
for a goat-stag is an extrinsic property, like being to the left of a column,
whereas being for a cat is an intrinsic property, like being made of tin.\footnote{I first proposed the idea of understanding extrinsic being as an extrinsic prop-
erty in Embry (2017).}

But how exactly are we to understand the notion of extrinsic be-
ing? Getting a grip on this concept provides significant insight into
Suárez’s brand of ontological pluralism and also helps to understand
why he rejects the univocity of being with respect to real beings and
beings of reason. As far as I know, Suárez nowhere attempts to analyze
the intrinsic/extrinsic distinction, but he does provide hints, and those
 hints can be illuminated by the contemporary literature on the intrinsic/extrinsic distinc-
tion.\footnote{Some of Suárez’s Jesuit followers offer more in the way of at least describing
the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic denominations. A character-
ization remarkably similar to Lewis’s can be found in Izquierdo, Pharus scientiarum, d. 12, q. 3, n. 42, p. 298a. Another interesting passage is in Carleton,
Philosophia universalis, Logica, d. 14, s. 1, p. 70a. Carleton notes that the standard
eample of an extrinsic denomination, being cognized, can be had in an intrin-
sic fashion, as when one thinks about oneself, but being cognized is an extrinsic
denomination nonetheless because intrinsic denominations are necessarily
intrinsic.}

14. David Lewis once informally characterized the distinction as follows: “In general, something has an intrinsic property solely in virtue
of how that thing itself is; it has a purely extrinsic property solely in
virtue of how accompanying things, and its external relations to those
accompanying things, are” (Lewis 2001: 384). Here Lewis character-
izes the intrinsic/extrinsic distinction in terms of the in virtue of
relation. He ultimately finds this characterization unsatisfactory because
we do not have a “clear enough understanding of ‘solely in virtue of’”
(Lewis 2001: 384). However, the in virtue of relation has been the subject of much pro-
gress in recent metaphysics. Even critics of the in virtue of relation agree
that we have a clear enough understanding of it (Wilson 2014, Koslicki
2015). Advocates note that we often say that certain facts obtain in vir-
tue of others. We might say, for example, that glass is fragile in virtue
of its microphysical structure, an act is wrong in virtue of the fact that
it causes pain, I am in pain in virtue of the fact that my C-fibers are
firing, and ‘Trump’ refers to Trump in virtue of a baptism ceremony.\footnote{These examples are adapted from Rosen (2010). Similar examples can be
found passim in the grounding literature.}

15. Getting a grip on this concept provides significant insight into
Suárez’s brand of ontological pluralism and also helps to understand
why he rejects the univocity of being with respect to real beings and
beings of reason. As far as I know, Suárez nowhere attempts to analyze
the intrinsic/extrinsic distinction, but he does provide hints, and those

11. Examples of these claims abound in Suárez. For a start, see DM 54.2.11–12, XXVI, 1020b–1021a; 8.1.4, XXV, 276b; 31.1.2, XXVI, 225b; 32.2.14, XXVI, 323a. The claim that objective being is extrinsic does not make a prominent appear-
ance in many later Jesuit treatments of beings of reason, but Giuseppe Polizzi
attributes it to Suárez and argues at length for it (Philosophiarum disputatio-
um tomus primus de logica, d. 11, s. 5, pp. 133a–156a).

12. For more examples, see Doyle (1984).

13. I first proposed the idea of understanding extrinsic being as an extrinsic prop-
erty in Embry (2017).
then A gives rise to B. In that case, A also provides a *sui generis* metaphysical explanation for B, and A is ontologically prior to B.16

This is not the place to argue for a particular analysis of intrinsicality, but I want to show how the notion of grounding can provide a better sense of what it could mean to say that something has extrinsic being. Gideon Rosen (2010) develops Lewis’s informal characterization into an analysis of intrinsic properties.17 Adapting Rosen’s analysis slightly for present purposes, we can understand intrinsicality as follows:

**The grounding analysis of intrinsicality:**

F is intrinsic if and only if, as a matter of necessity, for all x:

(i) If x is F in virtue of φ(y) — where φ(y) is a fact containing y as a constituent — then y is part of x; and

(ii) If x is not-F in virtue of ϕ(y), then y is part of x.

Here the ‘all’ in ‘for all x’ has to be understood unrestrictedly, as ranging over anything with any sort of being. Any property or way of being that is not intrinsic is extrinsic. Thus, there are two ways to be extrinsic on Rosen’s analysis. F is extrinsic just in case (i) a fact of the form [x is F] could be grounded in φ(y), where φ(y) is a fact containing y as a constituent, and y is not a part of x, or (ii) a fact of the form [x is not-F] could be grounded in ϕ(y), where y is not a part of x. (The purpose of the second clause is to account for the extrinsicality of loneliness. Something is not-lonely because there is something else, so, by the second clause, loneliness is extrinsic. For our purposes we may focus on the first clause.) Rosen’s analysis yields the correct results with respect to Suárez’s examples of extrinsic properties. Possibly, I am seen in virtue of a perceptual episode belonging to someone else, who is not a part of me, so being seen is an extrinsic property. I am to the left of this column in virtue of the relative positions of myself and this column, which is not a part of me, so being to the left of this column is an extrinsic property. I am a seller because of a transaction between myself and a buyer, who is not a part of me, so being a seller is an extrinsic property. And so on.18 It is important to note that grounding is *not* efficient causation. Otherwise, every property that is caused by something outside its bearer would be extrinsic. I return below to the relationship between grounding and causation *vis-à-vis* beings of reason.19

Suárez thinks that objective being is like being seen, being to the left of a column, being a seller, and other extrinsic properties. Rosen’s analysis of extrinsicality can help us get some grip on what it might mean to say that being is extrinsic. In light of Rosen’s analysis, to say that objective being is extrinsic is to say that facts of the form [x has objective being] could be grounded in facts with constituents that are not part of x. As mentioned above, Suárez does not leave us with an explicit theory of grounding or extrinsicality. My claim here is that Suárez explicitly endorses the above analysis of extrinsicality; my claim is that Rosen’s analysis of extrinsicality helps us to get an independent grip on what it might mean to say that objective being is extrinsic, and why that claim matters.

But I can also make a slightly stronger claim: Suárez’s own remarks are not only consistent with but also suggestive of the above explanation of extrinsic being. For Suárez explicitly states that objective being is grounded in some real being:

16. The literature on grounding is vast and growing quickly. In addition to Rosen (2010), canonical discussions include Schaffer (2009) and Fine (2012).

17. The application of Rosen’s analysis of extrinsicality to extrinsic being I am borrowing from Embry (2017).

18. A potentially serious problem for Rosen’s analysis is that it entails that non-existence is intrinsic, for how can something that does not exist have intrinsic properties? It is not entirely clear how Suárez would respond to this worry, but there is some evidence that he thinks that non-existents can have intrinsic properties. This is because he thinks non-existents can have the intrinsic property of being ‘non-repugnant’ or not metaphysically impossible, even if they have extrinsic being (DM 31.2.2, XXVI, 250a; 31.3.3, XXVI, 233b; 31.6.13, XXVI, 246a). So it is possible that Suárez would bite the bullet on this objection.

19. The fact that grounding is not efficient causation does not by itself rule out the possibility of an effect being grounded in its cause, just as being taller than is not the same as thinking about, and yet I can think about something than which I am taller.
That objective being, although it is nothing in the being of reason, nevertheless necessarily presupposes some real being, in which it is grounded [fundetur], or from whose denomination or relation that objective being quasi results. [DM 54.2.3, XXVI, 1019a; see also DM 1.1.6, XXV, 4a; DM 54.1.9, XXVI 1018a]

In the surrounding passage Suárez makes it clear that the real being in which a being of reason is grounded is a token thought [aliquam cogitationem] (DM 54.2.4, XXVI, 1019a). So his view is that objective being is grounded in thoughts. Suárez himself does not explicitly connect this grounding claim with his claims to the effect that objective being is extrinsic, but in light of Rosen’s analysis of extrinsicality, it becomes exegetically fruitful to do so. The idea can be summed up like this:

(i) Suárez claims that objective being is extrinsic, like being married or being to the left of a column.

(ii) For a property or feature of something to be extrinsic is for it to be grounded in something else—something not a part of the thing extrinsically denominated.

(iii) So, when Suárez claims that objective being is extrinsic, we can understand him as saying that objective being, or facts about objective being, are grounded in something outside of the objective beings themselves.

(iv) In fact, this is how Suárez talks: he says that objective being is grounded in de re thoughts about objective beings. For example, the objective being of goat-stag is grounded in my thought about a goat-stag.

This explanation of objective being reveals the truth behind Shield’s interpretation. While Suárez clearly states that there is more than one way of being, one of those ways of being—objective being—is not

metaphysically fundamental. So beings of reason are metaphysically dependent on and posterior to de re thoughts about them.

It is natural to think that objects of thought are already “out there”, waiting for us somehow to grasp them mentally. Shield’s interpretation is correct insofar as it denies this picture. On Suárez’s view, beings of reason are not there until we think about them. As Suárez explains, there is a sense in which we are the efficient causes of beings of reason (DM 54.2.3, XXVI, 1019a). To be sure, beings of reason do not have efficient causes strictly speaking, since efficient causes bring things into existence, and beings of reason do not exist (DM 54.2.2, XXVI, 1018b). But the intellect “produces” beings of reason by producing the thoughts in which they are grounded:

The intellect is the efficient cause [loosely speaking] of beings of reason, but it produces them only by producing some cognition or concept, by reason of which the being of reason is said to have objective being in the intellect. [DM 54.2.4, XXVI, 1019a]

So the picture is this. The intellect efficiently causes a thought. That thought grounds a being of reason. So we produce beings of reason indirectly, by producing the mental acts in which they are grounded. Similarly, we might produce semantic facts by producing the baptismal ceremonies in which they are grounded, normative facts by producing the social facts in which they are grounded, and so on. As will

21. Some authors reject Suárez’s position on the grounds that the object of thought must be available for thought prior to our thinking about it. Suárez’s defenders simply reject that idea, saying that the objects of thought are in a sense generated by our thoughts. See Carleton, Logica, Philosophia universa, d. 13, s. 2, n. 4, p. 66a–66b.

22. This insertion is justified by a nearby text, where Suárez says that the intellect is an efficient cause of beings of reason “in a broad sense [lato modo]” (my emphasis, DM 54.2.4, XXVI, 1019a).

23. In the generation after Suárez, other Jesuits argue that beings of reason can be produced in this way by the senses and simple acts of apprehension (Arriaga, Cursus, Metaphysica, d. 7, s. 3, ss. 2–3, pp. 1013a–1015b).
become clear below, the metaphysically derivative nature of objective being is why Suárez’s brand of pluralism is non-strict.

3b. The common concept principle
So here is where we stand: Suárez rejects the univocity of being with respect to real beings and beings of reason because being is not intrinsic to beings of reason. This is to say that facts of the form [x has objective being] are grounded in facts containing de re thoughts about x. But how does it follow that there is no common concept of being?
To answer this question, return for a moment to Suárez’s argument against the generic concept of being:

But a common concept [of being] has no place here, since such a concept requires that inferiors truly and intrinsically participate in the form signified by the name. But a being of reason cannot intrinsically participate in the being by which a being is said to be. [DM 54.1.10, XXVI, 1018a]

The claim that there is no common concept of being appears from this passage to be based on what I will call the common concept principle:

The common concept principle: If concept C applies to x1, x2, x3, … xn, then C signifies a property had by x1, … xn in an intrinsic fashion.

Since a common concept of being would not signify an intrinsic property, Suárez concludes that we simply have no common concept of being.

Unfortunately, the common concept principle is prima facie implausible, since it seems to imply that we do not have concepts for extrinsic properties. The common concept principle also stands in tension with Suárez’s optimism about what the human intellect is capable of conceiving, as indicated by his treatment of beings of reason, in addition to his frequent discussion of extrinsic denominations. If we have no concepts for extrinsic properties, then we have no concept of objective being. Presumably that conclusion would not be welcome to Suárez.

A weaker, more plausible reading of the common concept principle is available, on the basis of another passage in which Suárez again affirms something close to the common concept principle:

[Some terms] signify a form that is intrinsically in the first analogate alone and in the others only by a relation or extrinsic denomination, like ‘health’ and other terms. The unity of the formal concept is inconsistent with this sort of case, since the analogates are not properly similar or in agreement. [DM 2.1.14, XXV, 70a]

This passage is importantly different from the previous passage. The claim in this passage is not that we do not have concepts of extrinsic properties, but that such concepts do not have “unity.” We might therefore understand Suárez as saying that if we have such concepts, they must be composite, perhaps because they are built up by way of definition out of concepts for intrinsic properties and relations. On my proposed weakening, the common concept principle is about the relative semantic fundamentality of certain terms in a mental language, and it states:

The weak common concept principle: Any concept of an extrinsic property has a decomposition into more basic concepts of intrinsic properties and relations.

As far as I know, there is no smoking-gun proof text supporting the weak common concept principle. The merits of the weak principles are that (i) it is plausible and consistent with Suárez’s seeming presumption that we do in fact have concepts of extrinsic properties, whereas the strong version is not so consistent, and (ii) the weak reading of the common concept principle is supported by Suárez’s treatment of the analogy of extrinsic attribution, as I will now explain. This sort of
analogy occurs when ‘F’ signifies a property that some things have in an intrinsic fashion and others have in an extrinsic fashion. Suárez tells us that what it is to be F in an extrinsic fashion can be defined in terms of a relation to something’s being F in an intrinsic fashion. Consider one of Suárez’s examples: the generic predicate ‘being healthy’ (DM 28.3.14). We could of course distinguish between various specific ways of being healthy: being healthy for an animal, being healthy for a diet, being healthy for a relationship, and so on. But Suárez is concerned with a generic predicate, generic in the sense that it applies to animals, diets, and relationships. Suárez notes that the generic predicate ‘healthy’ signifies a property that some things have intrinsically and some things have extrinsically. For example, a healthy cat has health intrinsically, but healthy medicine has health extrinsically. This is sufficient to make the generic property being healthy extrinsic, according to the above analysis of extrinsicality. For present purposes, the important point is that Suárez tells us that what it is for medicine to be healthy can be defined in terms of the health of an animal: for medicine to be healthy is for medicine to cause the health of an animal. So here we have an extrinsic property, the generic property of being healthy. This property is extrinsic because some things have it in virtue of their relations to other things. The weak common concept principle predicts that, if we have a generic concept of health, that concept must have a decomposition into intrinsic properties and relations. And that is exactly what Suárez says: to be healthy in the generic sense is (something like) to be in a properly functioning biological state, or to cause such a state, or… Hence, the extrinsic property of being healthy has a decomposition into the intrinsic property of being in a properly functioning biological state and causal relations to that state.

According to the weak common concept principle, our concepts of intrinsic properties and relations are semantically more fundamental than our concepts of extrinsic properties. On this reading, Suárez can grant that we have concepts of extrinsic properties, and, more to the point, of generic being. His point is that such concepts are semantically derivative. And in the immediately above quotation, Suárez also provides a rationale for the weak common concept principle: “since the analogates are not properly similar or in agreement.” In other words, Suárez assumes that the semantically primitive terms in our mental language are resemblance-tracking. But terms that pick out extrinsic properties are not resemblance-tracking. For example, the property of being made of tin or close to something made of tin does not track resemblance-making features of the world: it can be shared by a tin can and a pile of cat food. Suárez concludes that our concept of such a property, if we have one, is semantically derivative. The common concept of being fails to track resemblance in exactly the same way that the concept of being made of tin or close to something made of tin does (De anima 4.1.3–4, III, 713b–714a). So, Suárez concludes, the common concept of being, if we have such a concept, is semantically derivative on a more specific concept of being that is resemblance tracking.

At this point someone might object or at least be puzzled about how to square (my reading of) Suárez’s view of being with apparently conflicting passages throughout the Metaphysical Disputations. If I am right, Suárez thinks we have multiple concepts of being, and the generic concept of being is derived from the more primitive, specific concepts of being. But, someone might worry, the whole point of DM 2 is to establish that we have only one formal and only one objective concept of being. Further, on my reading, objective being is extrinsic;
but in DM 28.3.14–17, Suárez argues for the claim that being is analogous by the intrinsic analogy of attribution, which entails that being is intrinsic to the items to which the concept of being applies.

My answer to this worry is to point out that ‘being’ is systematically ambiguous in the Metaphysical Disputations between (at least) real being, generic being, and objective being (for simplicity I omit other ways of being, like potential being). In DM 1, Suárez argues that the object of metaphysics is real being. Hence, he is generally concerned with real being in the first 53 disputations, and claims that seem to conflict with my reading can be read as being about real being, not a generic concept of being that applies to real beings and beings of reason. Consider the examples cited above from DM 2 and DM 28. Suárez opens DM 2 by telling us he is concerned with the ratio of the object of metaphysics, which is real being. So his claim that we have only one concept of being means that we have only one concept of real being. And in DM 28.3, where Suárez says that being is analogous with the intrinsic analogy of attribution, Suárez is speaking of the division of real being into God and creatures (DM 28.3.10). Beings of reason are neither real, nor God, nor creatures; so his claims there are not about beings of reason.

We may now return to Suárez’s argument against the univocity of being. In light of the foregoing, the argument appears to run as follows:

Suárez’s argument against the univocity of being:

(1) Any concept of an extrinsic property has a decomposition into more basic concepts of intrinsic properties and relations.

(2) Generic being is extrinsic.

(3) Hence, there is no semantically primitive concept of generic being common to existents and beings of reason.

(4) Hence, there is no univocal, semantically primitive concept of being common to existents and beings of reason.

Premise (1) is based on the assumptions that (i) the primitives in a mental language track resemblance-making features of the world, and (ii) extrinsic properties are not resemblance-making features of the world. Even if the first assumption turns out to be mistaken, the argument might be re-stated in terms of an ideal language whose primitives track the “perfectly natural” properties in Lewis’s (1983) sense, extrinsic properties being less than perfectly natural. Premise (2) is based on Suárez’s claim that the being of beings of reason is grounded in de re thoughts and is therefore extrinsic. Given a grounding analysis of extrinsicality, Suárez’s claim that objective being is grounded in de re thoughts entails that objective being is extrinsic.

To be clear about the dialectical situation, Suárez does not offer any arguments, as far as I am aware, for the claim that objective being is grounded in de re thoughts. But it does not follow that nothing can be said in favor of that claim. In my view, it is intuitively plausible that goat-stags and their ilk have being only because someone thinks about them. The ‘only because’ here is plausibly cashed out in terms of grounding. Further support for the claim that objective being is grounded in de re thoughts might come from the attractiveness of the resulting theory. As we have seen, there is some motivation to assert that (i) there are beings of reason, since we can think about them and say true things about the, but, obviously (ii) beings of reason do not exist. Suárez wants to endorse both claims, thereby securing the benefits of both. Ontological pluralism allows one to endorse both claims. But as the Idle Hypothesis shows, it is not enough merely to endorse ontological pluralism. One must motivate ontological pluralism, and show that it is not “mere obfuscation”. Suárez’s claim that objective being is grounded in de re thoughts is the linchpin of his response to the Idle Hypothesis objection. If you grant that claim, you get an attractive theory of nonexistent objects of thought.
If ontological monism is construed as the claim that the generic ontic predicate is semantically primitive, while the specific ontic predicates are derivative, Suárez’s argument against univocity constitutes an argument against ontological monism and, *a fortiori*, a response to the Idle Hypothesis objection. In the end, Suárez’s claim is that ‘generic being’ is not resemblance tracking, just as ‘being tin or close to something tin’ is not resemblance tracking. The reason for this is that generic being is extrinsic, just as being *tin* or close to something *tin* is extrinsic, and extrinsic properties are not resemblance-tracking. Suárez thinks mental language is ideal insofar as its primitive terms are resemblance-tracking. It follows that mental language does not have a primitive concept of being that applies univocally to cats and goat-stags. Given that there are goat-stags, monism is false.

However, it is worth noting that Suárez recognizes only one intrinsic way of being: existence. It follows from the foregoing that Suárez can recognize only one ontic predicate as semantically primitive: ‘exists’. ‘Objective being’ cannot be primitive because it is an extrinsic denomination and therefore fails to be resemblance-tracking, just like ‘being seen’ fails to be resemblance-tracking. So while Suárez recognizes multiple ontic predicates, he can recognize only one primitive ontic predicate: ‘exists’. If ontological pluralism is construed as the claim that multiple, specific ontic predicates are primitive, it would follow that Suárez is not an ontological pluralist. This reveals why there is something right about Shields’s interpretation, insofar as it rejects an ontological pluralist interpretation.

But the claim that Suárez is an ontological monist obscures an interesting distinction between dialectical options that Suárez’s discussion brings to the fore. Given Suárez’s two specific ontic predicates and the generic ontic predicate, one might think:

i. Only the generic ontic predicate is primitive,

ii. All and only the specific ontic predicates are primitive,

iii. Only one specific ontic predicate is primitive, or

iv. No ontic predicates are primitive.

I have characterized ontological monism as (i) (as does McDaniel 2009; 2017, ch. 1). Clearly, (ii) would be a kind of ontological pluralism (McDaniel 2009; 2017, ch. 1). But Suárez’s view is best characterized by (iii), a kind of half-way house between (i) and (ii). It is important to make these distinctions, since an argument for one of the above options might not support, and might even undermine, the others. Suárez rejects (i) because generic being is extrinsic, and he rejects (ii) because objective being is extrinsic. He endorses (iii) because he thinks that existence is primitive, but objective being is not. Now that we understand the structure of and motivation behind Suárez’s view, it would perhaps be idle to haggle over labels. But in my view it is best to characterize Suárez’s view as a kind of ontological pluralism according to which there is more than one way of being, but only one such way is fundamental. I propose the label ‘non-strict ontological pluralism’. If someone wants to insist that Suárez’s view is better characterized as non-strict ontological monism, I will not object, but the important point is that there is a philosophical difference between (i) and (iii), and Suárez thinks (iii) has something to recommend it, while (i) does not.29

Works Cited


29. This paper was improved in light of valuable feedback from Philosophers’ Imprint’s referees, Martin Pickavé, Marleen Rozemond, audiences at the University of Groningen, and the University of Notre Dame’s “Being Univocal” conference at the London campus.
Suárez on Beings of Reason and Non-Strict Ontological Pluralism


