

Is There Progress in Philosophy? The Case for Taking History Seriously¹

PETER P. SLEZAK

Abstract

In response to widespread doubts among professional philosophers (Russell, Horwich, Dietrich, McGinn, Chalmers), Stoljar argues for a 'reasonable optimism' about progress in philosophy. He defends the large and surprising claim that 'there is progress on all or reasonably many of the big questions'. However, Stoljar's caveats and admitted avoidance of historical evidence permits overlooking persistent controversies in philosophy of mind and cognitive science that are essentially unchanged since the 17th Century. Stoljar suggests that his claims are commonplace in philosophy departments and, indeed, the evidence I adduce constitutes an indictment of the widely shared view among professional analytic philosophers.

1. Culture of misery?

In his recent book-length study, Daniel Stoljar asks 'Why does it seem a truism that philosophy makes no progress? Why the culture of misery?'² Indeed, Paul Horwich says 'Our subject is notorious for its perennial controversies and lack of decisive progress – for its embarrassing failure, after two thousand years to settle any of its central questions'³ and, although Galen Strawson 'celebrates discovering that one has powerful allies' in the past, a 'moment of illumination, not defeat', he candidly admits 'almost everything worthwhile in philosophy has been thought of before'.⁴ Nicholas Rescher characterizes progress as 'a matter of achieving a rationally substantiated consensus on the basic issues of the field'⁵ and on the same criterion,

¹ I am grateful to Daniel Stoljar and David Chalmers for very helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. Thanks also to Galen Strawson for helpful remarks on the themes of this paper.

² D. Stoljar, *Philosophical Progress: In Defence of a Reasonable Optimism* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 165.

³ P. Horwich, *Wittgenstein's Metaphilosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 34.

⁴ G. Strawson, 'Panpsychism?' in A. Freeman (ed.) *Consciousness and its Place in Nature* (Exeter: Imprint Academic Press, 2006), 184.

⁵ N. Rescher, *Philosophical Progress and Other Philosophical Studies* (De Gruyter, 2014).

David Chalmers suggests ‘There has not been large collective convergence to the truth on the big questions of philosophy’.⁶ Of course, except for social constructivists, collective convergence is not the same as progress. Despite the wide consensus in significant areas of philosophy, there remains room to doubt convergence to the truth. Indeed, Eric Dietrich has argued that there is no progress in philosophy at all.⁷

To be sure, since Kuhn⁸ and Laudan⁹ it has become clear that, even in the case of science, the notion of progress is problematic and requires subtle clarification. However, we may rely on the same commonsense criteria that Stoljar recommends to make reliable judgments across the diverse disciplines. He presents the case for a ‘reasonable optimism’ on the grounds that, once we clarify ‘whether the current disagreements in philosophy are over the same issues as disagreements in the past’, we can recognize that ‘there is progress on all or reasonably many of the big questions of philosophy’.¹⁰ This is large and surprising claim in view of the widespread scepticism among professional philosophers.¹¹ Stoljar says Wittgenstein’s famous Preface to his *Tractatus* is ‘very naturally

⁶ D.J. Chalmers, ‘Why Isn’t There More Progress in Philosophy?’, *Philosophy* 90 (2015): 3–31.

⁷ E. Dietrich, ‘There Is No Progress in Philosophy’, *Essays in Philosophy* 12/2 (2011): 329–44. To take a significant example, there is, after all, a wide ‘collective convergence’ among philosophers on Kripke’s views of naming which are ‘as close to uncontroversial as any interesting views in analytic philosophy’ according to Christopher Hughes. Michael Devitt, too, notes ‘We can probably assume that nearly all philosophers of language agree with Kripkean intuitions’ on the conception of rigid designators taken to refute the Russell-Frege descriptivist account of names. See C. Hughes, *Kripke: Names, Necessity and Identity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), vii; M. Devitt, ‘Whither Experimental Semantics?’ *Theoria* 72 (2011): 5–36, 24. For a dissenting view, see N. Chomsky, ‘Language and Interpretation: Philosophical Reflections and Empirical Inquiry’ in J. Earman (ed.) *Inference, Explanation, and Other Frustrations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 99–128; N. Chomsky, *The Science of Language: Interviews with James McGilvray* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 28.

⁸ T.S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 1962).

⁹ L. Laudan, *Progress and its Problems* (University of California Press, 1977).

¹⁰ Stoljar op. cit. note 2 (2017), 14.

¹¹ B. Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 1912/1967).

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read' as 'proposing a profoundly optimistic view about philosophy'. However, Wittgenstein claims to have exposed the fatal errors upon which the entire history of philosophy has been founded.¹² Of course, this may be counted progress in the same way that exposing corruption and criminality in government is progress. In this sense, the *Tractatus* might be seen as profoundly optimistic if one welcomes the end of philosophy, which was exactly the way it was greeted by Schlick¹³ and the Logical Empiricists.

Nevertheless, against this current of doubt Stoljar does not offer 'hitherto unknown sociological or historical information that shows that there has been progress when most people think there is none'.¹⁴ Instead, he questions whether earlier problems are the same as later ones. Since historical and other evidence would be the most obvious, decisive way to combat pessimism, Stoljar's approach is ultimately unpersuasive, as I will argue. In part this is because, even granting Stoljar's case as far as it goes, his account omits consideration of central areas of contemporary philosophical debate that are essentially unchanged since at least the 17th Century and in some cases much earlier.¹⁵ Stoljar's admitted avoidance of getting his 'hands dirty' with the historical cases means that his framework of caveats permits overlooking the source of persistent controversies. Stoljar aims 'to defend reasonable optimism on the basis of a set of views about what philosophical problems are'.¹⁶ However, appearing to concede the limitations of this approach, Stoljar suggests that, at worst, his claims about past philosophers are commonplace in philosophy departments.¹⁷ Indeed, the historical evidence I will adduce constitutes an indictment of the widely shared view among professional analytic philosophers.

¹² L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922), 5.

¹³ M. Schlick, 'The Turning Point in Philosophy' (1930), in A.J. Ayer (ed.) *Logical Positivism* (The Free Press, 1959): 53–59.

¹⁴ Stoljar op. cit. note 2 (2017), x.

¹⁵ I neglect consideration of Stoljar's apparatus of 'boundary problems', 'constitutive' and 'successor' problems since we may concede Stoljar's positive arguments for progress in certain narrowly specified respects. I am concerned to reveal what has been left out of account in judging the state of the discipline.

¹⁶ Stoljar op. cit. note 2 (2017), x.

¹⁷ Stoljar op. cit. note 2 (2017), 77.

2. Residue, remnants

To the considerable extent that academic philosophy is still concerned with the traditional problems, these may be seen as the residue of progress as various issues become settled through the advance of science. Chalmers refers to such ‘disciplinary speciation’¹⁸ and Stoljar labels this the ‘Womb of Disciplines’ view.¹⁹ Stoljar dismisses this argument on the grounds that it ‘suggests that philosophy is *by definition* the subject that does not make progress’. However, this is to confuse the way the discipline may be defined with the *empirical facts* on which the definition is based. If certain obdurate problems persist as the proprietary business of philosophy, this is a sociological, historical fact, whatever may be one’s judgement of the worth of those ‘remnant’ problems. Stoljar illustrates the conceptual difficulty of defining the discipline with the case of a dividing amoeba,²⁰ but this will be hardly grounds for optimism when we discover that we are re-hersing exactly the same debates as the Early Modern philosophers. Faced with the ‘culture of misery’, neglecting such tendencies at the heart of mainstream analytic philosophy is to follow Bing Crosby’s advice to ‘accentuate the positive’ but it is to miss the evidence and very source of concern about the lack of progress. Furthermore, optimism can be maintained even in the most dire circumstances and, therefore, framing the issue in terms of such attitudes is unhelpful in assessing the objective state of the discipline.

For example, although not discussed by Stoljar, even the Gettier Problem²¹ and Newcomb’s Problem²² deserve mention among the notorious puzzles showing no sign of progress after fifty years of inconclusive debate in an immense literature. Forty years ago David Armstrong already wrote of the ‘truly alarming and ever-increasing series of papers’ in which the philosophical literature on the Gettier problem reaches ‘the extremes of futile complexity’.²³

¹⁸ Chalmers op. cit. note 6 (2015), 25.

¹⁹ Stoljar op. cit. note 2 (2017), 143.

²⁰ Stoljar op. cit. note 2 (2017), 147.

²¹ E.L. Gettier, ‘Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?’, *Analysis* **23** (1963): 121–3.

²² R. Nozick, ‘Newcomb’s Problem and Two Principles of Choice’, in N. Rescher et al. (eds) *Essays in Honor of Carl G. Hempel* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1969).

²³ Quoted in W.G. Lycan, ‘On the Gettier Problem Problem’ in S. Hetherington (ed.) *Epistemology Futures*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 148.

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These are arguably symptoms of a malaise characteristic of philosophy.²⁴

3. Dialogue with the Dead: Pointless Exercise?

Curley asks ‘Why is the history of philosophy worth bothering with?’²⁵ Indeed, many contemporary philosophers share Quine’s dismissive attitude to the history of philosophy on the grounds that determining what some historical figure thought and imparting it is less appealing than ‘determining the truth and imparting that’.²⁶ Scriven, like Quine, recommends the avoidance of ‘dialogue with the dead’ as not a fit subject for the education of those who aspire to make a contribution to philosophy. Gaukroger²⁷ disparagingly described efforts to show that Descartes was a precursor of modern cognitive science as a ‘pointless exercise, of no use in understanding anything’. However, on the contrary, as Pasnau²⁸ has said regarding the Scholastics, ‘The point ... is not to establish who said what first but to show that current ways of conceptualizing problems in these areas aren’t just an accidental product of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.’

Stoljar²⁹ echoes Harman’s³⁰ claim ‘There are no perennial philosophical problems’. That is, Stoljar rejects the ‘endurance view’ that ‘the big philosophical problems discussed today [are] ... *literally identical* to the problems discussed in the past’ (emphasis added). He acknowledges that, if warranted, the endurance view would make pessimism about philosophical progress ‘almost inevitable’. Of course,

²⁴ On Gettier see R.L. Kirkham, ‘Does the Gettier Problem Rest on a Mistake?’, *Mind* **93** (1984): 501–513; L. Zagzebski, ‘The Inescapability of Gettier Problems’, *Philosophical Quarterly* **44** (1994): 65–73; and S. Hetherington, ‘The Gettier Illusion’, *Synthese* **188** (2012): 217–230.

²⁵ E.M. Curley, ‘Dialogues with the Dead’, *Synthese* **67** (1986): 33–49, 37.

²⁶ W.V.O. Quine, *The Time of My Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), 194.

²⁷ S. Gaukroger, *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 8.

²⁸ R. Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 294.

²⁹ Stoljar op. cit. note 2 (2017), 125.

³⁰ Quoted in E.M. Curley op. cit. note 24. See also C. Wilson, ‘Is the History of Philosophy Good for Philosophy?’ in T. Sorell and G.A.J. Rogers (eds) *Analytic Philosophy and History of Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 75.

the key question of whether certain philosophical problems are *literally identical* depends crucially on how the problems are individuated. Stoljar acknowledges that certain broad ‘topics’ such as the relation of the mental to the physical may endure throughout history of philosophy,³¹ but he argues that philosophers focus on different specific questions within the wider topic. Stoljar says ‘it is clear that the Cartesian mind-body problem – that is, the problem that operates with *Descartes’ notion of a physical fact* – fits our pattern [emphasis added]’. However, in this way Stoljar identifies the relevant problem or question narrowly in terms of specific conceptions at a particular time and place. Like attending to people’s noses and freckles, this level of specificity misses the deep, persistent identities. Descartes is, after all, concerned with Levine’s ‘explanatory gap’³² – the puzzle of how to reconcile the mental, *res cogitans*, with the physical facts, even if the latter is understood as *res extensa* rather than our modern conception. Even Aristotle’s question concerning the relation of body and soul in *De Anima* is recognizable as our own despite the fact that his conception of mind and matter were different from ours.

As Fodor put it,³³ the puzzle arises because, ‘details aside, Lucretius had things about right. What there *really* is is atoms-and-the-void, and there’s really nothing else’. The fact that we no longer think of atoms in the way that Lucretius did, does not change the essential nature of the philosophical problem concerning the mind. Indeed, it is in exactly these terms that McGinn says ‘We don’t really yet understand, scientifically or philosophically, by what means or mechanism bunches of particles contrived to generate something so apparently different from themselves.’³⁴ The idea of emergent consciousness is the question that ‘boggles the human mind’ by seeking an ‘imaginative grip on the supposed move from the non-experiential to the experiential’.³⁵ And Chalmers begins his celebrated book with a typical declaration, ‘Consciousness is the biggest mystery. It may be the largest outstanding obstacle in our

³¹ Stoljar op. cit. note 2 (2017), 12, 58.

³² J. Levine, ‘Materialism and qualia: the explanatory gap’, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 64 (1983): 354–61.

³³ J.A. Fodor, ‘Don’t bet the chicken coop’, *London Review of Books* 24 (2001): 21–22.

³⁴ C. McGinn, ‘Consciousness and Cosmology: Hyperdualism Ventilated’ in M. Davies and G.W. Humphreys (eds) *Consciousness* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 157.

³⁵ G. Strawson, *Consciousness and its Place in Nature* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2006), 15.

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quest for a scientific understanding of the universe.’³⁶ However we may distinguish topics from problems, we have clearly made no progress on this ‘biggest mystery’ since Lucretius.

4. A Bum Rap?

Of course, it is not unusual to lament the fact that Anglo-American analytic philosophy is ‘not only unhistorical but anti-historical, and hostile to textual commentary’.³⁷ Nevertheless, M. Wilson challenges the justice of such aspersions ‘as a fairly bum rap’³⁸ in the light of the significant historical scholarship by analytic philosophers. However, to take an important illustrative case, historians’ recent portraits of Descartes, the most cited, most taught and most famous Early Modern figure, are unrecognizable to Analytic philosophers trained on the canonical texts and vast secondary literature of their own discipline. The ‘real Descartes’, as Strawson notes, is ‘not the ‘Descartes’ of present-day non-historical philosophy’.³⁹ Nadler has remarked ‘Hopefully, the days when Anglo-American Cartesian scholarship could consist in numerous books on the *Meditations* alone and an endless stream of papers on the Cartesian circle or the cogito are over.’⁴⁰ Indeed, fellow historian Desmond Clarke has entirely ignored these topics in his book *Descartes’s Theory of Mind*,⁴¹ but this neglect will seem scandalous to any well-educated philosopher. There is little evidence that Nadler’s hopes for reform have been realized and, *for that very reason*, the persistence of the narrow intellectual puzzles is interesting as much for what it reveals about philosophy today as for what it obscures about Descartes. For a notable example, despite the wide currency of Dennett’s term,⁴²

³⁶ D. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), xi.

³⁷ T. Sorell, ‘On Saying No to History of Philosophy’ in T. Sorell and G.A.J. Rogers (eds) *Analytic Philosophy and History of Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005), 1.

³⁸ M.D. Wilson, ‘History of Philosophy in Philosophy Today; and the Case of the Sensible Qualities’ in *Ideas and Mechanisms: Essays on Early Modern Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 459.

³⁹ Strawson op. cit. note 35 (2006), 201.

⁴⁰ S. Nadler, ‘Reid, Arnauld and the Objects of Perception’, *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 3 (1986): 165–173, 104.

⁴¹ D.M. Clarke, *Descartes’s Theory of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁴² D.C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (London: Penguin, 1991).

Descartes was not guilty of the ‘Cartesian Theater’ fallacy and, indeed, in his *Dioptrics* explicitly argued against a conception of mental representation that would require the notorious homunculus. Descartes precisely anticipated Dennett’s own position and Pylyshyn’s critique of this error in pictorial theories of vision and imagery.⁴³ Progress?

5. Still living and sparkling

Of the canonical texts, Descartes’ *Meditations* is compulsory reading for every philosophy student. However, in the general neglect of his ‘scientific’ works, we see perhaps the most revealing illustration of disciplinary ‘speciation’, ‘fission’ and the ‘remnants’ of scientific progress in the ‘womb of disciplines’. Of his vast corpus of writing only a very few parts remain of ongoing interest to philosophers. Typically, students and scholars pay exclusive attention to the *Meditations* and *Discourse* and ignore his *Dioptrics*, *Meteorology* and *Geometry* to which the *Discourse* was a preface. Clarke’s jarring, alternative portrait of Descartes is an indictment of contemporary philosophers’ practice:

I interpret the extant writings of Descartes as the output of a practising scientist who, somewhat unfortunately, wrote a few short and relatively unimportant philosophical essays.⁴⁴

Ouch! Clarke even asks the heretical question: Was Descartes a dualist?⁴⁵ Thus, for philosophers, it is astonishing, even scandalous, that, in his book Clarke makes no mention of ‘cogito’ or ‘doubt’. These omissions are incomprehensible to any student or teacher of academic philosophy. Clarke’s book is evidence of a growing recognition that Cartesian scholarship in the Analytic tradition has misunderstood Descartes and failed to grasp the significance of his thought even in those canonical texts to which their attention has been exclusively devoted.

Nothing could more clearly illustrate this regressive character of Analytical Philosophy than the attitude of Alexandre Koyré⁴⁶ who

⁴³ Z. Pylyshyn, *Seeing and Visualizing: It’s Not What You Think* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003); Z. Pylyshyn, ‘Return of the mental image: are there really pictures in the brain?’, *Trends in Cognitive Science* 7 (2003): 113–118.

⁴⁴ D. M. Clarke, *Descartes’ Philosophy of Science* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982), 2.

⁴⁵ D. M. Clarke op. cit. note 41 (2003), 258.

⁴⁶ A. Koyré, ‘Introduction’, Anscombe, E. & Geach, P.T. (eds) *Descartes: Philosophical Writings* (Middlesex: Thomas Nelson, 1954), vii.

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captures the idea that the traditional issues in Descartes scholarship and curricula are the live issues today. Thus, in his introduction to the Anscombe and Geach translation of Descartes' work, Koyré reflected on the centuries of progress that separate us from Descartes – 'long enough to throw back into the dead past most of the subjects and some of the problems that stirred the minds of our forgotten ancestors'. Among subjects to be discarded as obsolete, Koyré suggests, are Descartes' *Meteors* and large parts of his *Optics*. 'And yet' he adds by contrast, when reading the *Meditations* or *Discourse*, nobody 'will feel that he is dealing with dead texts. On the contrary: they are still living and sparkling'. Koyré is characteristically appreciative, indeed reverential, towards philosophical questions that remain 'permanently alive' even after centuries, for they are 'immensely difficult to grasp' and, therefore, permanently important and 'modern'.

6. Cogito

In particular, there is perhaps no problem in philosophy that is more studied by students and scholars than the one posed by Descartes' Cogito dictum, and no text is better known than his *Meditations*. Judging by the unabated publications,⁴⁷ Woodruff Smith is certainly correct to observe 'There is something dead right, and very much alive, about the cogito.'⁴⁸ Of course, what exactly is 'dead right' about it remains controversial after three centuries.

However, the *greatest* puzzle of the Cogito is why it should still be a puzzle. This problem has kept a philosophical industry busy for three hundred and fifty years. It is the puzzle of whether *Cogito ergo sum* is a logical inference, a pure intuition or something else, perhaps a 'performance'.⁴⁹ Moreover, the 'purely' textual and 'philosophical' issues cannot be plausibly separated in such cases. The difficulty of Descartes' texts is the difficulty of the mind-body problem itself. It is in this sense that the *Meditations* offer, in Frankfurt's words,

⁴⁷ For example, recent book-length treatments include: H. Sarkar, *Descartes' Cogito* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); J. Broughton, *Descartes's Method of Doubt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); G. Baker & K.J. Morris, *Descartes' Dualism* (London: Routledge, 1996); M. Rozemond, *Descartes's Dualism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁴⁸ D. Woodruff Smith, 'The Cogito circa AD 2000', *Inquiry* **36** (2000): 225–54.

⁴⁹ J. Hintikka, 'Cogito Ergo Sum: Inference or Performance?', *The Philosophical Review* **71** (1962): 3–32.

‘not so much a theory to be understood as an exercise to be practised’.⁵⁰ Three hundred and fifty years of inconclusive debate in the ‘massive and ever-growing corpus of secondary literature on Descartes’⁵¹ suggests this staple ‘remnant’ of old-fashioned philosophy might constitute a case study of the ‘nonideality’ limitations on our thinking in Chalmers’ sense.⁵² Indeed, despite its revered status, the manifest lack of an uncontroversial solution to the puzzle may be due to a seductive illusion – a peculiar kind of elusiveness rather than its intrinsic intellectual difficulty. The exegetical problem has not been widely seen in these terms but a less reverential attitude is expressed *en passant* by the logician Bar-Hillel who blames the intractability in this case on a specific kind of puzzlement concerning indexicality which he says is ‘a major cause of many philosophical pseudo-problems and pseudo-theses; and, in the confusion it creates when not fully understood, is partly responsible for the otherwise almost incomprehensible veneration in which the Cartesian Cogito is held.’⁵³ In this vein, I have argued that the Cogito is a variant of familiar paradoxical or ‘ungrounded’ statements like The Liar – a kind of Cantorean ‘Diagonal’ argument.⁵⁴ Such an account is textually faithful and has the virtue of revealing why the Cogito has been so elusive, as well as reconciling the deductive and intuitive interpretations of the insight. On this account, the Cogito turns out to be a member of a family of notorious paradoxes and, thereby, a kind of intellectual illusion, or pseudo-problem. In his last article, Hintikka acknowledged the merits of this analysis and his indebtedness to it in modifying his own view.⁵⁵ This account is

⁵⁰ H. Frankfurt, *Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen: The Defense of Reason in Descartes’s Meditation* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970; republished by Princeton University Press, 2008), 15.

⁵¹ J. Cottingham, ‘Why Should Analytic Philosophers Do History of Philosophy’ in T. Sorell and G.A.J. Rogers (eds) *Analytic Philosophy and History of Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), vii.

⁵² Chalmers *op. cit.* note 6 (2015).

⁵³ Y. Bar-Hillel, ‘Indexical Expressions’, *Aspects of Language* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1970), 199.

⁵⁴ P. Slezak, ‘Descartes’s Diagonal Deduction’ *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* **34** (1983): 13–36; P. Slezak, ‘Was Descartes a Liar? Diagonal Doubt Defended’, *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* **39** (1988): 379–388; P. Slezak, ‘Doubts about Descartes’ Indubitability: The Cogito as Intuition & Inference’, *Philosophical Forum* **41** (2010): 389–412.

⁵⁵ J. Hintikka, ‘René pense, donc Cartesius existe’ *Cahiers de philosophie de l’université de Caen* **50** (2013): 107–120. For acknowledgement of Hintikka’s

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perhaps disappointing in the way that a magic trick is disappointing when explained. Nevertheless, even if the sleight-of-hand seems obvious in retrospect, the puzzlement is real and tells us something important about the nature of some philosophical problems and their persistence.

7. Squiggle squiggle

It is easy to assume that contemporary puzzles arising from cognitive science and AI pose new problems for philosophers and that their debates reflect progress over old-fashioned preoccupations. However, we see a striking anticipation of Searle's notorious Chinese Room problem long before it spawned the recent decades of inconclusive debate in an immense literature.⁵⁶ Searle's Chinese Room is a metaphor for the computational conception of mind and was devised to demonstrate the impossibility of genuine meaning or intentional content in purely symbolic computers or 'Strong AI'. However, to go back no further in history, Wittgenstein's oft-cited *Investigations* question was: What gives life to a sign that by itself seems dead? Of course, the question precisely anticipates Searle's puzzle arising from the meaningless 'squiggle squiggle' of symbolic AI. In fact, the same conundrum has a much longer history. Descartes' account of visual perception involves the transmission of signals along the nerve filaments from the retina to the brain – essentially a correct account of the encoding of abstract, symbolic information or computation in the modern sense. In the *Optics* and *Passions* Descartes describes the causes by which objects produce perceptions as occurring 'in the same way in which, when we pull one end of a cord, we make the other move'. In the same terms, Descartes compared sensory perception via nerves to the transmission of movements in a blind man's stick in the *Optics*.⁵⁷ Searle's

indebtedness, see X. Kieft, 'Peter Slezak, interlocuteur anonyme de Jaakko Hintikka', *Bulletin cartésien XLIV, Archives de Philosophie* 78 (2015): 157–216.

⁵⁶ J. Searle, 'Minds, Brains and Programs', *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 3 (1980): 417–424. See articles in J. Preston, and M. Bishop (eds) *Views Into the Chinese Room: New Essays on Searle and Artificial Intelligence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002).

⁵⁷ R. Descartes, *Optics. The Writings on Descartes, Volume 1*. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff & Dugald Murdoch, translators (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 166.

incomprehension of the ‘meaningless’ symbols is uncannily evoked by Glanvill in 1661 who asks ‘But how is it, and by what Art doth the soul read that such an image or stroke in matter ... signifies such an object? Did we learn such an Alphabet in our Embryo-state?’⁵⁸ Glanvill suggests that the ‘motions of the filaments of nerves’ must represent the quality of objects by analogy with the way in which a person learns to understand a language, for otherwise ‘the soul would be like an infant who hears sounds or sees lips move but has no understanding of what the sounds or movements signify, or like an illiterate person who sees letters but “knows not what they mean”.’ Glanvill’s response to Descartes is just Searle’s response to ‘Strong AI’.

8. The ocular metaphor

We see a striking lack of progress in the modern ‘Imagery Debate’⁵⁹ which revives and embraces the ocular metaphor characterized by Rorty as ‘the original sin of epistemology’.⁶⁰ The Debate was characterised as ‘one of the hottest topics’ in cognitive science by Block⁶¹ but it is perhaps the most remarkable modern duplication of seventeenth century controversies. Pylyshyn’s⁶² criticism of the most ubiquitous and pernicious error today was exactly anticipated by Descartes and the one Arnauld charged against Malebranche⁶³ – namely, the confusion of properties of objects with properties of their representations, that is, confusing properties *in essendo* with properties *in repraesentando*. Descartes explains that we must avoid the philosophers’ common assumption that ‘in order to have sensory perceptions the soul must contemplate certain images transmitted by objects to the brain’ or that ‘the mind must be stimulated, by little pictures formed in our head’.⁶⁴ Instead, ‘the problem is to know simply how they can enable the soul to have sensory

⁵⁸ Quoted in J.W. Yolton, *Perceptual Acquaintance from Descartes to Reid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 28.

⁵⁹ M. Tye, *The Imagery Debate* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1991).

⁶⁰ R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 146.

⁶¹ N. Block, ‘Introduction: What is the issue?’ in N. Block (ed.) *Imagery*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), 1.

⁶² Pylyshyn op. cit. note 43 (2003).

⁶³ T.M. Schmaltz, ‘Malebranche on Ideas and the Vision in God’ in S. Nadler (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 73.

⁶⁴ Descartes op. cit. note 57, 165.

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perceptions of all the various qualities of the objects to which they correspond – not to know how they can resemble these objects’.

9. The endurance view: Jackson’s ‘Knowledge Argument’

Stoljar acknowledges that contemporary problems often have historical precursors, but suggests that there is ‘no reason to suppose the very same big questions in philosophy have been discussed and debated for centuries’. Of course, this claim rests crucially on what is meant by ‘*the very same*’. Stoljar illustrates his point with the example of Descartes and Jackson⁶⁵ who ‘are asking distinct questions about that subject matter, owing to their differing understandings of mind, matter, and the possible relations between them’. However, as with Lucretius, by emphasizing such differences, we fail to notice the deep underlying commonality. Moreover, a further reason that Descartes is not asking *exactly* the same question as Jackson is that he is on the *opposite side* of the Knowledge Argument having spelled out the fallacy in his physiological texts ignored by philosophers. Descartes’ *Optics* criticizes ascribing qualitative features of phenomenal experience to the physical properties of the brain – essentially the criticism of the Knowledge Argument that Jackson himself later endorses.⁶⁶ It is not Descartes but Malebranche who appears to anticipate Jackson’s Knowledge Argument. Malebranche wrote: ‘If a man had never eaten a melon, or seen red or blue, he would consult this alleged idea of his soul in vain.’ As Schmaltz notes,⁶⁷ Malebranche’s position appears to evoke Jackson’s original view of Mary’s qualia, and he draws essentially Jackson’s conclusion adding, ‘Heat, pain, and color cannot be modifications of extension, for extension can only have various figures and motion.’⁶⁸ Malebranche suggests that both the ‘learned and the

⁶⁵ F. Jackson, ‘Epiphenomenal Qualia’ *Philosophical Quarterly* 32 (1982): 127–136; reprinted in P. Ludlow, U. Nagasawa and D. Stoljar (eds) *There’s Something About Mary*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004).

⁶⁶ F. Jackson, ‘The Knowledge Argument, Diaphanousness, Representationalism’ in T. Alter and S. Walter (eds) *Phenomenal Concepts and Phenomenal Knowledge: New Essays on Consciousness and Physicalism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 54.

⁶⁷ T.M. Schmaltz, *Malebranche’s Theory of the Soul: A Cartesian Interpretation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 85.

⁶⁸ N. Malebranche, *The Search After Truth* (1674), translated by T.M. Lennon and P.J. Olscamp, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

ignorant' 'clearly understand that extension is incapable of pain, taste, odor or of any sensation ... For there is no sensible quality contained in the idea that represents extension.' Jackson's critique of his own earlier position as the 'act-object' theory of sense-data is essentially Arnauld's critique of Malebranche. It was precisely the recurrence of the idea of sense-data since Locke, that J.L. Austin lamented as 'a curious and in some ways rather melancholy fact'.⁶⁹ Like Jackson, Locke challenged those who think phenomenal experience might be produced by words or in any way other than by the appropriate sensation. Locke says 'He that thinks otherwise, let him try if any Words can give him the taste of a Pineapple, and make him have the true *Idea* of the Relish of that celebrated delicious Fruit.'⁷⁰ Stoljar's own example, supposed to illustrate progress in philosophy, appears to demonstrate precisely the opposite. Rorty has referred to the underlying problem as '*the philosophical urge*' which is to model knowing on seeing – the 'veil of ideas' doctrine he credited to 17th century thinkers.⁷¹ However, four centuries earlier, Aquinas was criticized for postulating inner representations 'in which real objects are intellectually cognised as in a mirror' and would therefore 'veil the thing and impede its being attended to'. Pasnau remarks, 'So much for veil-of-ideas epistemology as a modern invention.'⁷²

10. Qualia and the Heat Death of the Universe

As Stoljar recognizes, the Knowledge Argument is a defence of qualia. However, this issue gets only a passing mention in his book though it is the central, persistent source of the mind-body problem – the perennial puzzle about subjective, qualitative phenomenal states, the 'raw feels' of experience seen in the immense literature on zombies, inverted spectra and other esoterica. Levine's 'explanatory gap'⁷³ merely re-invents Wittgenstein's 'unbridgeable gulf'.

1997), 634. I am grateful to Tad Schmaltz for very helpful discussion of this issue.

⁶⁹ J.L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 61.

⁷⁰ J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) (ed.) P. H. Nidditch. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 424.

⁷¹ Rorty op. cit. note 60 (1979).

⁷² R. Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 5.

⁷³ Levine op. cit. note 32 (1983).

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Indeed, it is arguably *the* fundamental puzzle that has plagued the mind-body problem throughout its history. Of course, this puzzlement is the reason for Nagel's remark, 'Consciousness is what makes the mind-body problem really intractable.'⁷⁴ Searle,⁷⁵ like Levine, echoes Sherrington in 1942⁷⁶ almost verbatim suggesting that the physical causes of pain do not explain the subjective feeling. Significantly, Dennett⁷⁷ reminds us that his own critical 'illusionism' about consciousness was anticipated by Place's classic manifesto for modern materialism⁷⁸ which cited Sherrington's 'phenomenological fallacy'. The modern puzzle is captured evocatively by McGinn's question 'How can technicolour phenomenology arise from soggy grey matter?'⁷⁹ In the 17th Century, Robert Boyle asked in the same terms how can 'this seemingly rude lump of soft matter' that appears like so much custard' perform such 'strange things'.⁸⁰ Lycan conveys the point dramatically in his wry observation 'Someday there will be no more articles written about the "Knowledge Argument"' for qualia. 'That is beyond dispute. What is less certain is, how much sooner that day will come than the heat death of the universe.'⁸¹

11. Intentionality: All the rage these days

If we turn to another major area of philosophical concern today, in something of an understatement, Georges Rey said recently

⁷⁴ T. Nagel, 'What is it like to be a bat?', *Philosophical Review* **83** (1974): 435–450.

⁷⁵ J. Searle, *The Mystery of Consciousness* (London: Granta Books, 1997), 99.

⁷⁶ C. Sherrington, *Man On His Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1942).

⁷⁷ D.C. Dennett, 'Illusionism as the Obvious Default Theory of Consciousness', *Journal of Consciousness Studies* **23** (2016): 65–72, 70.

⁷⁸ U.T. Place, 'Is Consciousness a Brain Process?', *British Journal of Psychology* **47** (1956): 44–50. reprinted in B. Beakley and P. Ludlow (eds) *The Philosophy of Mind: Classical Problems/Contemporary Issues* (Cambridge, Mass.: Bradford/MIT Press, 1992), 33–39.

⁷⁹ C. McGinn, 'Can We Solve the Mind-Body Problem?', *Mind* **98** (1989): 349–66.

⁸⁰ Quoted in J. Sutton, *Philosophy and Memory Traces: Descartes to Connectionism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 119.

⁸¹ W.G. Lycan, 'Perspectival Representation and the Knowledge Argument' in Q. Smith and A. Jokic (eds) *Consciousness: New Philosophical Essays*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 384.

'Mental representation is all the rage these days.'⁸² In the same vein, Robert Cummins characterised the vexed problem of mental representation as '*the* topic in the philosophy of mind for some time now'.⁸³ They didn't mean four hundred years. It will come as a surprise to current philosophers that the Cartesians sought to explain the conformity between ideas and objects⁸⁴ which is, of course, just the recalcitrant problem of intentionality regarding mental representations. Fodor suggests that in the period since Hume the theory of ideas 'seems to have made some modest progress'⁸⁵ but Yolton has noted that the burning question among philosophers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is that of 'objects present to the mind'⁸⁶ – precisely the question of 'concept possession' central to Fodor's *Hume Variations* and his earlier *Concepts*.⁸⁷ Our 'modern' topic of representation was central to the entire philosophical tradition of 'ideas' since the late Middle Ages.⁸⁸

Moreau⁸⁹ suggests that the famous dispute between Malebranche and Arnauld rested on an 'ambiguity' in Descartes' *Third Meditation*⁹⁰ in which he distinguishes between the *réalité formelle* and *réalité objective* of representational ideas, essentially the modern contrast between narrow, internal meaning and wide, external or referential semantic content. That is, the current internalism/externalism debate over the content of mental representations is a re-enactment of the most famous controversy of the 17th Century. Indeed, the view of Antoine Le Grand (1620–1699) is quite startling in its faithfulness to contemporary conceptions. Le Grand argues that

⁸² G. Rey, 'Intentional Content and a Chomskian Linguistics' in A. Barber (ed.) *Epistemology of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 140.

⁸³ R. Cummins, *Representations, Targets and Attitudes* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 1.

⁸⁴ J.W. Yolton, *Perception and Reality: A History from Descartes to Kant*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 1.

⁸⁵ J.A. Fodor, *Concepts: Where Cognitive Science Went Wrong* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 157.

⁸⁶ J.W. Yolton, *Perceptual Acquaintance from Descartes to Reid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 6.

⁸⁷ Fodor op.cit. note 85 and J.A. Fodor, *Hume Variations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁸⁸ See Pasnau op cit. note 28 (1997).

⁸⁹ D. Moreau, *Malebranche* (Paris: Vrin, 2004), 89.

⁹⁰ R. Descartes, *The Writings on Descartes, Volume II*, J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff & Dugald Murdoch, translators (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 28.

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ideas have a double aspect, precisely anticipating Ned Block's 'two component' view.⁹¹ Block explains that there is 'narrow' or 'conceptual role' meaning entirely 'in the head,' and external, referential meaning relating internal representations with the world. Three hundred years earlier Le Grand wrote:

... in the *Idea* or notion of a Thing two things are to be considered: *First*, That it is a *Modus* inherent in the *Mind*, from whence it proceeds: The *other*, That it shews or represents something. The former of these proceeds from the *Mind*, as its effective Principle; the latter from the Object or thing apprehended, as from its Exemplary cause.⁹²

12. Tables and Chairs: Bumping into things

Celebrating progress with the emergence of a scientific orientation in analytic philosophy of mind, Fodor mockingly observed that philosophers have been notorious for absurd worries such as the 'fear that there is something fundamentally unsound about tables and chairs'.⁹³ Fodor joked that, while such concerns are difficult to explain to one's spouse and colleagues, nevertheless, occasionally some *merely* philosophical worry turns out to be 'real' as in the case of the representational character of cognition. He explained that, unlike other proprietary concerns, this puzzle is no longer just a philosophers' preoccupation because its solution has become a precondition of progress in several disciplines of cognitive science. However, there is an acute, unintended irony in light of the modern representational conception of the mind which evokes precisely the worry about tables and chairs.

Unwittingly echoing Berkeley's idealism, Fodor says 'machines typically don't know (or care) what the programs they run are

⁹¹ N. Block, 'Advertisement for a Semantics for Psychology' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). Reprinted in S. Stich and T.A. Warfield (eds) *Mental Representation: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994): 81–141.

⁹² Quoted in R.A. Watson, *The Breakdown of Cartesian Metaphysics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 93.

⁹³ J.A. Fodor, 'Presentation to the National Science Foundation Workshop on Information and Representation' B.H. Partee, S. Peters and R. Thomason (eds) *Report of Workshop on Information and Representation*, (Washington, D.C.: NSF System Development Foundation, 1985), 106–117.

about'.⁹⁴ That is, as Searle has notoriously complained, the meaningless 'squiggles' of computational symbols don't seem to capture the contents of mental representations about the world.⁹⁵ Accordingly, Jackendoff facetiously asks 'Why, if our understanding has no direct access to the real world, aren't we always bumping into things?'⁹⁶ But, of course, this is just the traditional worry about the reality of the external world.⁹⁷ Jackendoff's satire echoes Samuel Johnson's famous retort to Berkeley's 'ingenious sophistry'. Kicking a stone, he said 'I refute it thus.' Jackendoff, too, appeals to bumping into things, suggesting the way in which classical and modern theories appear to entail a disconnection of the mind from the world via mediating representations. Despite Fodor's optimism, cognitive science seems to have simply rediscovered the traditional philosophers' anxiety.

13. Too bad for you

Nothing could appear more remote from modern theories in philosophy today than Malebranche's 1674 doctrine of the *Vision of All Things in the Mind of God* – the theory that ideas are objects of our perception that exist in God's mind. However, despite the theological trappings, we can recognize the affinity of Malebranche's views with those at the very forefront of theorising today. Thus, when distilled from its theological elements, far from dying of itself as Locke⁹⁸ had predicted, Malebranche's *Vision of All Things in the Mind of God* (minus theology) is recommended by Fodor as the foundational

⁹⁴ J.A. Fodor, 'Tom Swift and his Procedural Grandmother' in his *Representations: Philosophical Essays on the Foundations of Cognitive Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1981), 207.

⁹⁵ Searle op. cit. note 56 (1980).

⁹⁶ R. Jackendoff, *Languages of the Mind* (Cambridge, Mass.: Bradford/MIT Press, 1992), 61.

⁹⁷ Fodor complains against 'internalist' semantics in generative linguistics that it is 'In effect, ... a sort of idealism about meaning: all our ideas are about ideas'. See J.A. Fodor, 'Semantics: an interview', *Revista Virtual de Estudos da Linguagem* 5 (2007): 6. Elsewhere, too, Fodor remarks 'I don't understand how a semantics can avoid lapsing into idealistic solipsism unless it recognizes some sort of symbol-world relation.' J.A. Fodor, *LOT2: The Language of Thought Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 53.

⁹⁸ J. Locke (1823), 'An Examination of P. Malebranche's Opinion of Seeing All Things in God', *The Works of John Locke, A New Edition, Corrected, In Ten Volumes, Vol. IX*. (London: Thomas Tegg; reprinted Amsterdam: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1963).

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conception of cognitive science – the Theory of Ideas conceived as objects or ‘mental particulars with causal powers and susceptible of semantic evaluation’.

Nadler⁹⁹ explains that Malebranche’s theory conforms with a problematic tripartite schema – subject, representation, and the world – the triadic structure that Danto described as ‘the basic cognitive episode’ and the fundamental concepts ‘in terms of which most of philosophy may be understood’.¹⁰⁰ As Arnauld complained, Malebranche regards the intermediary representation ‘as being actually distinct from our mind as well as from the object’.¹⁰¹ However, for Arnauld and Reid, representation may be conceived as dyadic rather than triadic, that is, in an ‘adverbial’ way, according to which ‘having a visual experience is a matter of sensing in a certain manner rather than sensing a peculiar immaterial object’.¹⁰² Here, I follow Nadler in seeing Arnauld as Reid’s ‘ally in his campaign against the theory of ideas’.¹⁰³ As van Cleve explains: ‘It is not, as in the sense-datum theory, a triadic fact involving the table, the perceiver, and a sense-datum as an intervening item.’¹⁰⁴

If there were any doubts about what Stoljar refers to as the ‘endurance view’¹⁰⁵ and the persistence of big problems throughout history, we may consider von Eckardt’s discussion of Peirce’s account of the irreducibly triadic sign relation between a sign,¹⁰⁶ an object and an interpretant. von Eckardt considers ‘the general outline, if not all the details, of what Peirce has to say about representation ... is tacitly assumed by many cognitive scientists’.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, today

⁹⁹ S. Nadler, *Malebranche and Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹⁰⁰ A.C. Danto, *Connections to the World: The Basic Concepts of Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), xi.

¹⁰¹ A. Arnauld, *On True and False Ideas* (1963), translated with Introductory Essay by Stephen Gaukroger (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 63.

¹⁰² See M. Tye, ‘The Adverbial Approach to Visual Experience’, *The Philosophical Review* **93** (1984): 195–225.

¹⁰³ Nadler op. cit. note 40 (1986), 166.

¹⁰⁴ J. Van Cleve, *Problems from Reid* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 67.

¹⁰⁵ Stoljar op. cit. note 2 (2017), 64.

¹⁰⁶ B. von Eckardt, *What Is Cognitive Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: Bradford/MIT Press, 1993).

¹⁰⁷ von Eckardt op. cit. note 105, 145. See also P. Slezak, ‘The Tripartite Model of Representation’, *Philosophical Psychology* **15** (2002): 239–270.

Bechtel explains ‘There are ... three interrelated components in a representational story: what is represented, the representation, and the user of the representation.’¹⁰⁸ It is telling that von Eckardt cites Kosslyn’s work on mental imagery as a paradigmatic example of research in cognitive science.¹⁰⁹ This reference takes on a particular significance in light of Pylyshyn’s critique of the pictorial theory as fatally flawed.¹¹⁰ Arnauld made the same complaint about the 17th Century version of the tripartite conception of ideas. He said ‘You [Malebranche] are not happy with this distinction. Too bad for you.’¹¹¹ And too bad for much philosophy and cognitive science today.

14. Miracle Theory

It is no coincidence that Arnauld’s 1683 treatise *On True and False Ideas* advocated a non-relational conception and was concerned to repudiate what he describes as ‘imaginary representations’, saying ‘I can, I believe, show the falsity of the hypothesis of *representations*’.¹¹² Today, proponents of ‘dynamic systems’¹¹³ and ‘situated cognition’¹¹⁴ argue that symbolic representations which intervene between the mind and the world are explanatorily redundant and must be dispensed with. These echo the debate between Arnauld and Malebranche, described by Nadler as a debate between the

¹⁰⁸ W. Bechtel, ‘Representations and Cognitive Explanations: Assessing the Dynamicists’ Challenge in Cognitive Science’ *Cognitive Science* **22** (1998): 295–318, 299.

¹⁰⁹ von Eckardt op. cit. note 106, 32.

¹¹⁰ Z. Pylyshyn, ‘The Imagery Debate: Analog Media versus Tacit Knowledge’, *Psychological Review* **88** (1981): 16–45, reprinted in N. Block (ed.), *Imagery* (Cambridge, MA: Bradford/MIT Press, 1981); Z. Pylyshyn, *Seeing and Visualizing: It’s Not What You Think*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2003). See also P. Slezak, ‘The Imagery Debate: Déjà vu all over again? Commentary on Zenon Pylyshyn’, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* **25** (2002): 209–210.

¹¹¹ Schmalz op. cit. note 63 (2000), 73.

¹¹² Arnauld op. cit. note 101 (1683), 77.

¹¹³ T. van Gelder, ‘The Dynamical Hypothesis in Cognitive Science’, *Behavioral & Brain Sciences* **21** (1998): 615–665; Bechtel op. cit. note 108 (1998).

¹¹⁴ See W.J. Clancey, ‘Situated Action’, *Cognitive Science* **17** (1993): 87–116; J.G. Greeno, ‘Situations, Mental Models and Generative Knowledge’ in D. Klahr and K. Kotovsky (eds) *Complex Information Processing: The Impact of Herbert A. Simon* (New Jersey: Erlbaum, 1989).

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direct realism of an ‘act theory’ and an indirect or representationalist ‘object theory’, respectively.¹¹⁵ He explains, ‘If ideas are representational mental acts [rather than entities], then they can put the mind in direct cognitive contact with the world – no intervening proxy, no *tertium quid*, gets in the way.’ To reject internal *objects* is not to reject mental representations altogether. In Arnauld’s case, as in Reid’s response to Hume, this is not the ‘miracle theory’ that repudiates intermediaries altogether as Fodor has uncharitably suggested.¹¹⁶ As De Rosa¹¹⁷ recognizes, the term ‘idea’ did not refer to any third thing between thought and its object though this was not to repudiate representations as such. For Descartes and Arnauld, ideas are not distinct entities but just those very activities of the mind which are essentially representative *per se*. Our mind is capable of knowing bodies immediately, that is, ‘without any intermediary between our perceptions and the object’.¹¹⁸

In view of the recurrence of these problems today, Putnam¹¹⁹ returns to Reid’s critique of ideas, rejecting representations as interface between mind and world. In response, Fodor says that this stratagem today flies in the face of the success of modern psychology because without mental representation ‘much of what the mind does would be miraculous’.¹²⁰ However, Copenhaver¹²¹ argues that Reid does not hold such an absurd view because perception may be direct but still mediated. This is essentially Fodor’s own position illustrated in his joke that long-distance telephone conversations with his wife are ‘direct’ though mediated in all sorts of ways. He says ‘still, it is my wife that I talk to’. Reid would have agreed,¹²² like

¹¹⁵ S. Nadler, *Arnauld and the Cartesian Philosophy of Ideas* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 6.

¹¹⁶ J.A. Fodor, ‘A Science of Tuesdays’ *London Review of Books* **22** (2000): 21–22.

¹¹⁷ R. De Rosa, *Descartes and the Puzzle of Sensory Representation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 13.

¹¹⁸ Arnauld op. cit. note 101 (1683), 77. See Nadler op. cit. note 115 (1989), 97.

¹¹⁹ H. Putnam, ‘Sense, Nonsense, and the Senses: An Inquiry Into the Powers of the Human Mind’, *The Journal of Philosophy* **41** (1994): 445–517, reprinted as *The Threefold Cord: Mind, Body and World*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

¹²⁰ Fodor op. cit. note 116 (2000).

¹²¹ R. Copenhaver, ‘A Realism for Reid: Mediated But Direct’, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* **12** (2004): 61–74, 62.

¹²² T. Reid (1813), *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, reproduced with Introduction by B. Brody (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1969), 161.

Descartes and Arnauld too. As if to answer Fodor, Copenhaver says, 'The challenge, then, is to locate a version of direct realism that does not require perception to remain unmediated.' Above all, in light of Fodor's mockery, it is important to appreciate that 'causal mediation is not the sort to which Reid's direct realism is opposed'.¹²³ Apart from exegetical concerns, if Fodor is right about Hume's *Treatise* being the founding document of modern cognitive science,¹²⁴ a proper appreciation of Reid has dire implications for the contemporary field.

15. Fodor's guilty passion: *Le plus séduisant cartésien*

In their celebrated debate, Arnauld criticised Malebranche's 'object' theory for ascribing corporeal properties to mental ones. Significantly, Thomas Reid's made the same diagnosis of the fatal flaw in Hume's doctrine that Fodor has embraced. Fodor admits to having harboured something like a 'guilty passion' for Hume's *Treatise* but Hume's debt to Malebranche's *Search After Truth* was 'so profound, in fact, that, if Hume were a modern academic, he would not escape the charge of plagiarism'.¹²⁵ Lennon points out 'Hume's debt to Malebranche is, if anything, greater than that of his illustrious predecessor in British Empiricism', namely, Berkeley.¹²⁶ Indeed, Hume recommends that in order to understand his own metaphysical views, 'I desire of you, if you have Leisure, to read once over La Recherche de la Verité de Pere Malebranche'.¹²⁷ Just as Lennon remarks that Hume's theory of causation is Malebranche's 'occasionalism' minus God, we may say analogously that Hume's theory of ideas is Malebranche's Vision in God minus God. If the interest and relevance of Malebranche's theory today is surprising, this is because its theological trappings and overtones of mysticism have obscured the seventeenth century issues and their relevance from the view of modern philosophers.¹²⁸ Accordingly,

¹²³ Copenhaver op. cit. note 121 (2004), 72.

¹²⁴ Fodor op. cit. note 87 (2003), 134.

¹²⁵ S. Buckle, *Hume's Enlightenment Tract* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 191.

¹²⁶ T.M. Lennon, 'Introduction to N. Malebranche *The Search After Truth*', translated by T.M. Lennon and P.J. Olscamp, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), xxii.

¹²⁷ Quoted in Buckle op. cit. note 124 (2001), 136.

¹²⁸ See N. Jolley, *The Light of the Soul: Theories of ideas in Leibniz, Malebranche, and Descartes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 201.

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focus on Malebranche clarifies the provenance of Humean ‘ideas’ and, thereby, the received orthodoxy in philosophy today.

Fodor says ‘How to understand the metaphysics of representation, is among the deepest and most hotly debated of current philosophical issues.’¹²⁹ Semantics poses ‘one of the Great Metaphysical Problems’, namely that of finding a place for meaning in the natural order.¹³⁰ The *modern* puzzle is how to reconcile internal causal processes with their external reference and to determine what is the ‘glue’ that holds them together. However, Yolton remarks ‘That startling distinction between causing and meaning, the two different interactive relations between perceivers and the world, is precisely the distinction I find in several of the writers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.’¹³¹ Fodor explains, ‘cognitive processes are constituted by causal interactions among mental representations, that is, among semantically evaluable mental particulars’.¹³² Translated, this means ideas are mental objects that can be true or false and the ‘essential problem’ is to explain how thoughts manage to preserve *truth*.¹³³ In the same way, Malebranche asks ‘if our ideas were only our perceptions, if our [internal] modes were representative, how would we know that things correspond to our ideas?’ Fodor says the semantic evaluability of mental states is ‘the most important fact we know about minds; no doubt it’s why God bothered to give us any.’¹³⁴ The theological joke reveals a secular version of the *Vision of all things in God*. That is, for ‘God’ read ‘some sort of nomic connection between mental representations and things in the world’,¹³⁵ the modern guise of Empiricist concern with the ‘veridicality’ of ‘ideas’. Although neglected and underestimated by modern analytic philosophers, it is not without reason that Malebranche was characterised by a 17th-century author, as we might say of Fodor too, *En un mot, c’est le plus séduisant cartésien que je connaisse* – in a word, the most seductive Cartesian that I know.

¹²⁹ Fodor op. cit. note 97 (2007).

¹³⁰ J.A. Fodor, ‘Review Essay: Remnants of Meaning by Stephen Schiffer’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **50** (1989): 409–423, 409.

¹³¹ Yolton op. cit. note 84 (1996), 28.

¹³² Fodor op. cit. note 87 (2003), 135.

¹³³ Fodor op. cit. note 85 (1998), 10.

¹³⁴ J.A. Fodor, *The Elm and the Expert: Mentalese and its Semantics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), 9.

¹³⁵ Fodor op. cit. note 87 (2003), 109.

16. Argument from illusion

The persistence of the traditional tripartite conception means we need not be surprised if familiar classical puzzles re-emerge in a new guise. Thus, it is noteworthy that the modern puzzle of misrepresentation¹³⁶ is a variant of the venerable ‘Argument from Illusion’ in support of Empiricists’ ‘ideas’ and ‘sense data’. The modern problem arises because causal or co-variation theories of content seem to be unable to capture the way a mismatch might arise between a representation and the world. If a mentalese token ‘mouse’ might be caused not only by mice but also by shrews, then the symbol must *ipso facto* mean ‘shrew’ and cannot be in error. That is, if ideas are caused directly by external objects, we can’t have misrepresentations (i.e. illusions), whereas the classical Argument from Illusion concludes from the fact that we have illusions (i.e. misrepresentations), our ideas can’t be directly caused by external objects (i.e. there must be mediating direct objects of perception). These are equivalent contrapositives. Schematically:

1. Cause/correlation \rightarrow No illusion i.e. No misrepresentation (Fodor and Dretske)
2. Illusion \rightarrow No cause/correlation (Malebranche and Locke)

Fodor asks how he could think about his Granny if he is in New York and she is in Ohio. Or, Fodor asks ‘How can I be in an unmediated relation to Ebbets Field (alas long since demolished); or to my erstwhile dentist, who passed away a year ago in August?’¹³⁷ This is, of course, just the notorious Argument from Illusion. Malebranche too, remarks ‘it often happens that we perceive things that do not exist, and that even have never existed – thus our mind often has real ideas of things that have never existed. When, for example, a man imagines a golden mountain, it is absolutely necessary that the idea of this mountain really be present to his mind.’¹³⁸ Of course, the classical conclusion endorsed by Fodor is that we

¹³⁶ F. Dretske, ‘Misrepresentation’ in R.J. Bogdan (ed.) *Belief: Form, Content and Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), reprinted in S. Stich & T. Warfield (eds) *Mental Representation*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 157–173. J.A. Fodor, *Psychosemantics: The Problem of Meaning in the Philosophy of Mind*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987); Fodor op. cit. note 133 (1994).

¹³⁷ Fodor op. cit. note 116 (2000), 21.

¹³⁸ Malebranche op. cit. note 68 (1674), 217.

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must be in a direct relation with *something else*, namely, our image, idea, or representation – ironically, the very source of the persisting fear that there is something unsound about tables and chairs. In a famous passage Malebranche wrote: ‘it is not likely that the soul should leave the body to stroll about the heavens, as it were, in order to behold all these objects’¹³⁹ and in a parallel passage Fodor writes that thoughts ‘have to be, as it were, ‘out there’ so that things in the world can interact with them, but they also have to be, as it were, ‘in here’ so that they can proximally cause behavior... it’s hard to see how anything could be both.’¹⁴⁰ Curley asks the pertinent question:

Someone doing a really thorough study of an argument like the argument from illusion would have to look at it in an historical dimension, taking account of its various forms and the interpretive issues each author may raise, and giving some attention to the question: ‘*Why, if this argument is fallacious, has it had such a strong appeal to so many people over such a long period of time?*’¹⁴¹ [emphasis added.]

17. Defining catastrophe.

Descartes shared the very ‘pragmatism’ and ‘direct realism’ of Arnauld and Reid that Fodor sees as ‘the defining catastrophe’ in recent philosophy of mind.¹⁴² This is the idea that a person’s abilities such as recognitional and classificatory capacities determine the nature of concepts. However, since Putnam and others such as Cummins¹⁴³ defend this catastrophic Arnauld–Reid view today, looking backwards at these neglected Early Modern philosophers might explain why there has been less progress since the 17th

¹³⁹ Malebranche op. cit. note 68 (1674), 217.

¹⁴⁰ Fodor op. cit. note 134 (1994), 83.

¹⁴¹ Curley op. cit. note 25 (1986), 46.

¹⁴² Fodor op. cit. note 87 (2003), 73. Schneider notes that Fodor’s use of the term ‘pragmatism’ is ‘idiosyncratic’ and ‘unfortunate’ referring, not to the philosophical tradition of William James and John Dewey, but only to a theory of concept possession as a kind of ‘knowing how’ through abilities for recognition, classification and inference. See S. Schneider, *The Language of Thought: A New Philosophical Direction* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011), 160.

¹⁴³ R. Cummins, *The World in the Head* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 152–173.

Century than Fodor or Stoljar suggest. Fodor's disparagement of Reid brings into relief the difficulties of Fodor's own position when it is seen that Reid does not hold the absurd version of 'direct realism' attributed to him.¹⁴⁴ Wolterstorff notes:

... central elements of the pattern of thought against which he [Reid] tirelessly polemicized – the *Way of Ideas*, he called it – have been so deeply etched into our minds that we find it difficult even to grasp alternatives, let alone find them plausible.¹⁴⁵

Remarkably, contrary to received opinion, it is Reid rather than Hume who is seen by Putnam and Lehrer as the true father of cognitive science.¹⁴⁶ Indeed Wolterstorff judges Reid to be second only to Kant among great philosophers of the eighteenth century although he has almost disappeared from the canon of Western philosophy because his ideas have been trivialized and misunderstood. The neglect of these Early Modern philosophers is a symptom of the dominance of views long regarded as fatally flawed. In the case of Reid, for example, Galen Strawson remarks 'He is, in effect, forgotten – in spite of the fact that he appears, viewed from the present, as the natural and unacknowledged father, and astonishing anticipator, of the correctly moderate wing of the 20th-century 'direct realist' approach to the problem of perception'.¹⁴⁷ Although Reid (and Putnam) are relegated to uncharitable footnotes by Fodor, it is fair to say that the debate has made little progress over several centuries.

18. Conclusion

Colin McGinn observes the constancy of philosophical themes and remarks candidly 'Philosophy has a remarkable talent for staying the same.'¹⁴⁸ Indeed, Aristotle's *De Anima*, if not Plato's work, reads like a modern text. The first pages ask how we might distinguish the soul from the body and his answer is recognizably the

¹⁴⁴ See Copenhaver op. cit. note 121 (2004), and van Cleve op. cit. note 104 (2015).

¹⁴⁵ N. Wolterstorff, *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1.

¹⁴⁶ K. Lehrer, *Thomas Reid* (London: Routledge, 1989); Putnam op. cit. note 119 (1994).

¹⁴⁷ G. Strawson, 'What's So Good About Reid?', *London Review of Books* 22 (1990): 14–16.

¹⁴⁸ C. McGinn, *The Character of Mind: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), viii.

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modern ‘functionalist’ solution. The mind is not the material substance but the form of the body. As we see clearly from Aristotle’s analogies, he suggests that the ‘affections of soul are enmattered formulable essence’ – that is, as we would say today, embodied functional states. Rorty remarked that ‘Philosophy of mind is one of the few clear instances of intellectual progress which analytic philosophy has to its credit’,¹⁴⁹ but we have seen that this judgment must be tempered by the remarkable degree to which it has made no progress at all. Whether one adopts an optimistic or pessimistic attitude, Pasnau indicates the reasons that there has been such marked ‘endurance’ of philosophical problems:

It may be, as Rorty and many others have argued, that we are the victims of a badly misleading conceptual picture of the mind. But the conclusion I would draw is that this picture, right or wrong, is not just the product of a few idiosyncratic seventeenth-century thinkers. *It’s rather a picture that comes quite naturally to us when we think about the mind*, and it’s one that has been around much longer than is commonly thought.¹⁵⁰ [emphasis added.]

PETER SLEZAK (p.slezak@unsw.edu.au) is Associate Professor in philosophy at the University of New South Wales, Australia. His teaching and research interests include Descartes, Galileo, philosophy of language, visual imagery and the ‘Science Wars’. His recent publications include ‘Intuition in Linguistics: Syntax and Semantics’ in L.M. Osbeck and B.S. Held (eds) *Rational intuition: Philosophical Roots, Scientific Investigations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). He is President of the Australasian Society for Cognitive Science (2018–2020) and editor of Elsevier series *Perspectives on Cognitive Science*.

¹⁴⁹ R. Rorty, ‘Blunder around for a while’, *London Review of Books* **13** (1991): 3–6.

¹⁵⁰ Pasnau op. cit. note 28 (1997), 294.