"LANGUAGE AND DESCARTES’ DISEMBodied EGO"

(Passages from a work in progress: G. Hallett, *Invisible Language: Its Incalculable Significance for Philosophy*.)

OPENING PARAGRAPHS OF THE PREFACE:

“A main source of our failure to understand,” wrote Ludwig Wittgenstein, with himself and fellow philosophers chiefly in mind, “is that we do not *command a clear view* of the use of our words.”¹ Indeed, linguists aside, we are largely blind to our words’ workings. Thus, instead of “Invisible Language” I might have chosen the title “Linguistic Blindness” for this study, had that not had too harsh a sound. In certain contexts, the phrase could suggest willful blindness, whereas linguistic blindness, like physical, is seldom anybody’s choice. The phrase might also suggest total blindness, whereas linguistic blindness, like physical blindness, admits of degrees and, unlike physical blindness, is practically never total in those who still have their wits. Again, the words suggest constant deprivation, whereas on most occasions the condition Wittgenstein described has no untoward effects. Again, the phrase suggests an unnatural condition, whereas linguistic blindness is ever so natural—as natural as our ignorance of the inner workings of our lungs, hearts, and nervous systems. Indeed, the condition the words denote is not only natural, but largely necessary: as we speak or write we cannot constantly monitor the intricate functioning of our linguistic medium, any more than we can continually scrutinize our spectacles or the functioning of our hearts, lungs, or nerves as they do their thing.

This parallel could be misconstrued. It might suggest that, as physical problems often signal a diseased condition of hearts, lungs, or nerves, so philosophical problems often betray a diseased condition of language and that, accordingly, as physical therapy requires work on the affected parts or organs, so philosophical therapy often requires remedial work on language. However, such was not Wittgenstein’s view,² and neither is it mine. My concern, like his, is with the invisibility of language and the consequences thereof, not with defective language-use and its fallout. In diverting illustration of the difference, one might mention the boy Wittgenstein cites who, with the model of knitting apparently in mind, wondered how it was possible to “sew a dress.”³ The boy’s puzzlement

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signaled a gap in his understanding of the language, not a defect in the language. No conceivable language could eliminate all potentially misleading analogies.  

However, even when the extensive parallel just drawn is rightly understood, two disparities disturb it and largely explain the present work. First, when our lungs, hearts, nerves, or eyeglasses cause problems, we are typically aware of the problems and are duly concerned, whereas the more profound and pervasive the problems the invisibility of language occasions, the less likely we are to be aware of them and their source, hence to seek any remedy. Second, and more reassuring: whereas knowing that one’s respiratory, circulatory, nervous, or visual system is faulty does not automatically improve the condition, awareness of one’s linguistic blindness does remove the blindness. The great, persistent problem is achieving such awareness; and the fuller, deeper, and more accurate is the assessment of our linguistic blindness and its consequences, the fuller and more effective the remedy is likely to be. This hopeful conviction largely motivates the present reflection on philosophy's history and possibilities. 

Earlier inquiries alerted me to the interest of such a review. Thus, near the end of a recent work I was led to surmise that had adequate attention been paid from the start to language, the history of philosophy might have looked unrecognizably different. This suggestion appears both so plausible and so significant that it invites the scrutiny here undertaken. I have learned, however, that the suggestion needs to be stated more fully. For if it is taken to signify merely that language deserves much attention in philosophy, indeed more than it has often received, it may appear trivial. If, instead, it is taken, as with the later Wittgenstein, to signify that philosophy's chief remaining function is therapy for the tricks that language plays on unwary thinkers, it may appear implausible. However, these extremes do not exhaust the possibilities; the present study makes a more interesting case. On the one hand, I suggest that the invisibility of language has exercised a far more profound, pervasive influence in the history of philosophy than Wittgenstein came close to demonstrating, hence that full awareness of language's relevance would have altered the history of philosophy beyond recognition. On the other hand, I believe, nonetheless, that philosophy's positive possibilities, so often obscured by its actual practice, are far more extensive than Wittgenstein realized or acknowledged. Such are the two parts of the distinctive dialectical tale, first negative then positive, that I shall tell. 

Were there widespread agreement about the first, negative part of the story, there might be little need to recount it. And to focus instead on the second part and attempt to map philosophy's positive possibilities would surely be over-ambitious.

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5 Hallett, Linguistic Philosophy, 182.
As it is, though nowadays some few may agree in a general way with my assessment of language's hidden, massive significance for the history of philosophy, reading and personal contacts suggest that such is hardly a majority perception. This is not surprising, for it is not at all obvious at first glance that the history of philosophy might have differed beyond recognition had there been fuller awareness of language and its significance. The case needs to be made. Once it is made in some breadth and depth, a closing chapter will have to consider, at least briefly, the implications for philosophy's remaining possibilities. These, I believe, are still great: philosophy reaches as far as human thought can reach, and that, thanks largely to language, is very far.

A RELEVANT PARAGRAPH LATER ON:

On the whole, philosophers have shown little awareness of language-based criteria of individuation and their relevance. Even in recent times, when philosophers have been more alert to such issues, they may conflate criteria of individuation with criteria of identity, and, rejecting the latter (“The only kind of identity is self-identity!”), dismiss the former with them. The identity question starts with an x and a y (e.g., the book in my right hand and the book in my left) and asks if they are the same. The individuation question asks the prior question, what makes the x an x (e.g., a book in my left hand) and the y a y (e.g., a book in my right hand). Why the singular? Thus criteria of identity should not be confused with criteria of individuation. Yet, as many a discussion attests, they easily are.

START OF CHAPTER 3: DESCARTES’ MEDITATIONS

Like Plato and Aquinas before him, Descartes sometimes discussed words and their meanings, occasionally at length. Yet, also like his predecessors, Descartes showed very limited awareness of language and its significance. In the Meditations this deficit appears early and decisively in the work’s most familiar motif—the cogito. Some have wondered how, from this minimal starting point, Descartes can recover the rest of reality: “Knowledge of the first person signally fails to reach out beyond subjectivity to the concept of an objective independent order.” More fundamental doubts concern the starting point itself. Two passages from Wittgenstein’s Investigations can serve to suggest in a preliminary way the sort of problems that escaped Descartes’ notice (like that, apparently, of many commentators).

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6Cf. Griffin, Relative Identity, 42 (“It seems to me that the notion of principles of individuation is the most primitive idea on which we can start to build our account of relative identity”).

7Scruton, From Descartes to Wittgenstein, 33.
The first passage scrutinizes the logical oddity that its author, G. E. Moore, had stated as follows: “To say such a thing as ‘I went to the pictures last Tuesday, but I don’t believe that I did’ is a perfectly absurd thing to say, although what is asserted is something which is perfectly possible logically: it is perfectly possible that you did go to the pictures and yet you do not believe that you did.”\(^8\) As an example of contradiction, not in what is stated, but in the speech act stating it, Wittgenstein found Moore’s specimen intriguing. It shows, he observed to Moore, “that logic isn’t as simple as logicians think it is. In particular: that contradiction isn’t the unique thing people think it is.”\(^9\) Descartes’ “Cogito ergo sum,” as it figures in the *Meditations*, may offer a more intriguing variation. Supposedly, the self whose existence is there guaranteed by its thinking is not as yet a bodily human being: that will have to await final demonstration. Yet isn’t Descartes’ bodily existence already assured by his bodily utterance? How, in the very act of writing, can this French gentleman in his forties meaningfully question or bracket his own corporeal existence? Does such questioning on paper make any better sense than it would in face-to-face conversation? People cannot write or speak without bodies.\(^{10}\)

This may appear a trifling objection. Granted, it would be absurd for a writer or speaker to suggest, “Let me prove to your satisfaction and mine that I exist and have a body.” But such, it may be objected, is not Descartes’ situation. He is giving public expression to his private thoughts; and these, though private, make sense. No pragmatic incoherence invalidates them. For this defense, a different passage in Wittgenstein’s *Investigations* looks relevant. There he cites the recollections of a deaf-mute, Mr. Ballard, who wrote that in his early youth, even before he knew any language, he had had thoughts about God and the world. “It was during those delightful rides,” Ballard recounts, “some two or three years before my initiation into the rudiments of written language, that I began to ask myself the question: how came the world into being?” Thus, writes Ballard,

I remember at one time, when my eye fell upon a very large old stump which we happened to pass in one of our rides, I asked myself, “Is it possible that the first man that ever came into the world rose out of that stump? But that stump is only a remnant of a once noble magnificent tree, and how came that tree? Why, it came only by

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\(^{10}\)On issues of self-stultifying assertion and the *cogito*, but with a different focus (more exegetical than critical, on existence rather than bodily existence), see Wilson, *Descartes*, 67-71.
beginning to grow out of the ground just like those little trees now coming up.”

To such an account Wittgenstein responds, with puzzlement:

Are you sure—one would like to ask—that this is the correct translation of your wordless thought into words? And why does this question—which otherwise seems not to exist—raise its head here? Do I want to say that the writer’s memory deceives him?—I don’t even know if I should say that. These recollections are a queer memory phenomenon,--and I do not know what conclusions one can draw from them about the past of the man who recounts them.

Doubtless Wittgenstein would find similarly problematic the crucial early stage of the Meditations where, methodically shorn of his body and his world, hence supposedly of any language, Descartes has thoughts as rich as Ballard’s. Similar problems pervade the rest of the work, but let us begin where Descartes began, then follow his progress.

THE COGITO

In search of rock-bottom certainty on which to build, Descartes sets aside any truths susceptible of even the most extravagant doubt. With the help of such hypotheses as that of a demonic deceiver, he finds it possible to imagine “that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies” such as he naturally supposes. These realities and all that they imply or permit (e.g., linguistic communities and the languages they speak) will therefore have to be bracketed until Descartes can return and critically appraise their truth-status at the end of the Meditations. Notoriously resistant to any such doubts, however, is the existence of the one who entertains them: “I must finally conclude that this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.” Similar sureness characterizes the other thoughts, many and varied, that survive Descartes’ radical doubting; for example:

Is it not one and the same “I” who is now doubting almost everything, who nonetheless understands some things, who affirms that this one

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11James, Principles of Psychology, I, 267.
13Descartes, The Philosophical Writings, II, 16.
14Ibid., 17.
thing is true, denies everything else, desires to know more, is unwilling to be deceived, imagines many things even involuntarily, and is aware of many things which apparently come from the senses? Are not all these things just as true as the fact that I exist, even if I am asleep all the time, and even if he who created me is doing all he can to deceive me?  

However, we may wonder: is it the same “I”—the same thinking but as yet bodiless I—that not only entertains the thoughts thus described but that, in full command of the language utilized, does the describing? Or, more plausibly (on the model of Ballard before and after his learning a language), should we distinguish between an authorial Descartes, in full possession of a language, and an indubitable Cartesian self, provisionally stripped of any such dubitable baggage? Even in this latter supposition, Descartes would have serious explaining to do, first with regard to the I described, then with regard to its thinking. The linguistic problems I will examine concerning Descartes’ disembodied ego and its ruminations have occasionally been noted but have not, to my knowledge, been fully, systematically addressed. The present inquiry offers an occasion to remedy this notable omission.  

I have compared Descartes’ linguistic situation with Ballard’s, but there are differences. Most significant, in his account Descartes faces problems not only, like Ballard, with regard to the thinking which he alleges but also, unlike Ballard, with regard to the self to which he attributes the thinking. Ballard at least has a body, both before and after he starts using language; but who or what is this “I” (there behind the veil of doubt) of which Descartes speaks? Discussion of this question has, for the most part, been more exegetical or epistemological than semantic. It has not addressed the basic question: if, as Descartes suggests, the “same ‘I’” does all this doubting, affirming, denying, and the rest, must it not (in the absence of any contrary stipulation by Descartes) be so identified by the customary individuating criteria, operative in the language employed (Latin, French, or other) for human bodily selves? Yet not till late in the Meditations will Descartes seek to recover the body bracketed at the start by his methodical doubt.  

A different comparison, from chapter 1, therefore seems apposite. As Plato failed to note the need for individuating criteria to make sense of his talk about the

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15 Ibid., 19.  
17 Cf., e.g., Wilson, *Descartes*, 66: “But if we take Descartes’s talk of knowing substances through their attributes to imply that the referent of ‘I’ in ‘I think’ is an inferred entity, we are faced with the very intransigent problem of justifying the assumption that there is a single entity that is the subject of all my thoughts.” More basic, in the absence of any applicable individuating criteria, is the problem of making sense of the assumption.
sameness of the soul before, during, and after its earthly sojourn, so Descartes
failed to note the need for individuating criteria to make sense of his talk about the
sameness of the I both before and after he has established its bodily existence. The
familiar individuating criteria available at the end are not available at the start,
before the veil of radical, body-bracketing doubt has been lifted.

This difficulty about individuation explains why I will pass over the much-
agitated question of the relationship between the two parts of Descartes’ famed
dictum “I am thinking, therefore I exist.” Exegetes have wondered whether the
saying states an inference of some kind. If so, of what kind? If not, how should it
be read? Though discussion of these questions has been confusing and complex,
the obscurity surrounding them deepens notably if we advert to the split between
Descartes’ authorial self and the spiritual “I” apparently referred to in his dictum.
For, with the authorial self bracketed for the duration of Descartes’ radical doubt,
the remaining, residual self, lacking a body, fails to satisfy any discernible criteria
of individuation. Thus, despite Descartes’ proprietary assumptions, there is no
telling to whom, if anyone, this self belongs, or indeed its very nature. In the
absence of individuating criteria, we cannot even assume that at least, whatever its
nature, the self that does the thinking is the “same” as the one that does the
existing.

The self’s alleged thinking proves equally perplexing. For one might assume
that at the start of the Meditations language, too, has been bracketed, along with all
the human beings who speak it, and that it has to be thus excluded, so as to save
the Meditations’ foundation from crumbling into semantic dust and rubble. But
how, if deprived of any language, can the ego still do all this doubting, afirming,
denyng, and the rest? How can the bodiless I have the thoughts that the bodily
Descartes describes? “Descartes’ (shaky) position,” writes John Cottingham,
“appears to be that linguistic terms are merely the outward clothing of inner
thoughts which are directly manifest to the thinker.” Thus, strip off the clothing
and the thoughts are unaffected; put back on the clothing, and the thoughts can be
reported. Where is the difficulty?

It appears if, setting aside such sartorial imagery, we inquire more closely
just how the bodiless ego can have the thoughts that the bodily Descartes
describes. In response I can conceive, roughly, four possible scenarios, each with
its own problems and all four, collectively, enveloping Descartes’ certainty-
seeking enterprise in a most unwelcome cloud of obscurity, right from the

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18Here, Edwin Curley’s comment has special relevance: “He consistently blurs the distinction between
inferences and propositions by referring to the whole formula ‘I think, therefore I am’ as a truth, a first principle, a
proposition, and a conclusion. In one place he explicitly speaks of the whole formula as being known intuitively”
(Descartes against the Skeptics, 79). Such is the labyrinth of language.
19Cottingham, Descartes, 46.
beginning. In a first hypothesis, the bodiless ego is having all these thoughts in the language in which they are reported, namely Latin. In the second, the reported thinking is still linguistic but the language of the thinking differs from that of the reporting. In the third, the thinking is no longer linguistic yet is somehow translated by Descartes the author into Latin. In the fourth, the thinking is still nonlinguistic but is just reported in Latin, not translated into it. Descartes (with his linguistic spectacles fixed firmly on his nose) does not note any such alternatives or choose between them. And none of them appears clearly implicit in his account, since all are deeply problematic. Of each imagined scenario we may ask, one by one, whether it makes sense, whether it indubitably does so, and whether, even if it did, it is indubitably realized in the situation Descartes envisages.

(1) Lone Latin Thinker. “There is no logical impossibility,” wrote Bertrand Russell, “in the hypothesis that the world sprang into being five minutes ago, exactly as it then was, with a population that ‘remembered’ a wholly unreal past.” Similarly, Descartes might suggest, there is no logical impossibility in his knowing Latin as well as he does even if no one had ever spoken Latin. His mind, or soul, would know the language and could do all the thinking, in Latin, that he describes, in Latin. To this, one response would be that, logical possibility aside, the soul’s natural possession of Latin is hardly an indubitable datum. Furthermore, spotting no logical impossibility is not the same thing as spotting the possibility—even the logical possibility--of the activity described. For linguistic mastery is more a matter of knowing how than of knowing that: it is built into our reflexes—our bodily reflexes.

In pertinent illustration, consider the first-person pronoun (here replaced by its English equivalent, “I”) that Descartes employs so freely, and centrally, from the start of the Meditations. For hearers, the word’s referent is determined by the person who speaks it. For the speaker, it is not: he or she does not watch to see from whose mouth the word is issuing. Neither, however, does the speaker make a quick introspective check to make sure the self-identification is correct. It suffices to know the language, unreflectively; and in that language “I” is the person who bodily produces the word. Clearly, the word could not function this way for a disembodied spirit. Clearly, if the knowing must be instinctive, bodily-based, it could not characterize such a spirit. Given, then, the plausibility of such an understanding of the first-person pronoun, it seems more doubtful than many of the things Descartes manages to question whether his disembodied self could have or

20Russell, The Analysis of Mind, 159.
21Noting differences between “I” and, for instance, proper names, Elizabeth Anscombe denied that “I” refers. The present discussion suggests, on the contrary, how flexible the notion of reference is and needs to be. How else might one succinctly express the relationship here in question, between “I” and the speaker? Cf. Teichmann, The Philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe, 149-63.
assert with certitude the thoughts he has it entertain behind the veil of radical doubt—for instance the thoughts already quoted: “I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.” And what holds here for the three occurrences of “I” holds likewise for “me” and “my.”

To further highlight the bodily reference of “I” in familiar parlance, consider Descartes’ quoted claim that it is the same “I” that does all this thinking.23 How, we might ask, would he answer the author who argued: “I was a shy and homely child’ involves, as it stands, a fantastic misstatement of fact. I1946 never was a child. It was I1910 who was shy and homely. Certainly I1946 and I1910 are not the same.”24

Rigorous development of this suggestion might lead to a minute-by-minute or a second-by-second I. An effective answer to such a doctrine would have to appeal, somehow, to linguistic usage—for instance, to the fact that people do say such things as “I was a shy and homely child” and that such usage establishes the reference of “I.” The word comes forth, unreflectively, in past-, present-, and future-tense utterances, from the lips of people who are spatio-temporally continuous with those (at different times, in different circumstances, varying extremely in appearance from the moment of birth to the moment of utterance) to whom they thus refer. Such is the “language-game,” determining the reference of “I.”25 Descartes, however, can offer no such response, as long as his doubt about the existence of bodily persons, including his own spatio-temporal self, persists. Neither can he readily assume that a disembodied spirit might be master of such a language-game.26

(2) *Latin Translation of Non-Latin Thinking.* Perhaps, if pressed for an explanation, Descartes might suggest that his Latin words translate those of a natural language of the mind. Without having to learn Latin or any other natural language, the self can think in mentalese. This suggestion would incur further difficulties. Not only would problems of the kind just noted persist, for mentalese as for Latin, but the existence of any such natural language of the mind is highly doubtful (not even Noam Chomsky would claim its existence), and a doubter as resourceful as Descartes could surely find reasons for questioning whether his Latin words faithfully translated any such nebulous, dubious idiom.

However, this failed second possibility tends to merge with a third. Although Aquinas, for example, sometimes characterized mental concepts as “words of the heart,” his general conception of the relationship between language and thought resembled Aristotle’s: “Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and

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21 For kindred remarks on this topic, see Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense*, 162.
22 Johnson, *People in Quandaries*, 118.
24 On this problem of individuation in Descartes, see Wilson, *Descartes*, 198-99.
written words are the symbols of spoken words. Just as all men have not the same writing, so all men have not the same speech sounds, but the mental experiences, which these directly symbolize, are the same for all, as also are those things of which our experiences are the images.”

Though there is no mention here of grammar or syntax, there is matching of spoken words and mental concepts. So, stretching the term “translation,” we might envision a further possibility for Descartes.

(3) Latin Translation of Nonlinguistic Thinking. Descartes’ essentialism could make such an alternative appear natural. For him, the “I,” for example, has an essence: it is a thinking thing, “a substance whose whole essence or nature is simply to think.”

If, then, there is an essence of thinking and an essence of substantiality, and if the mind can form likenesses of both essences, the word “I” (or “ego”) may communicate this conscious mental content (plus whatever manages to individuate the content). So too, perhaps, for the other terms Descartes so readily employs behind the veil of doubt: essences may simplify and unify the nonlinguistic mental content, permitting ready translation into whatever language Descartes chooses to employ (on the Aristotelian supposition that it, too, picks out the same standard essences). The writing, to be sure, is linguistic, but the thinking translated is not. It may be doubted whether Descartes himself would offer such an explanation; but, given his familiarity with this sort of thinking, it needs to be cited among conceivable solutions for the problem I have posed.

In our day, the difficulties for such a conception need hardly be urged. Take the word “think.” Having identified himself as a thing that thinks, Descartes asks, “What is that?” and replies (rather generously, by the standards of English or Latin usage): “A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions.” Each of these terms covers countless further variations—countless different forms and varieties of sensory perception, imagining, willing, and the rest. Thus, the notion that beneath all this multitudinous heterogeneity there lies a single, invariant essence of thinking, capable of mental representation and verbal expression (yet somehow never spotted or satisfactorily defined) is surely as open to doubt as anything Descartes dismissed from his firm foundation. A more plausible account of speech would rely less on mental representation and more on cognitive linguistic capacities, acquired by learning a language and encoded in the brain. But Descartes, early in the Meditations, is not yet ready to admit the existence of a brain.

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27Aristotle, De interpretatione 16a.
28Descartes, The Philosophical Writings, I, 127.
29Descartes, The Philosophical Writings, II, 19. On this latitude in Descartes’ use of “cogitare” and “penser” (itself inviting linguistic critique), see Kenny, Descartes, 68-70, and Cottingham, Descartes, 40.
(4) Latin Report of Nonlinguistic Thinking. To illustrate this further conceivable account of Descartes’ situation, and suggest its possible attractions, consider Russell’s empiricist, nonessentialistic conception of meaning and truth:

We can say that true propositions actually resemble their objectives [the realities they describe] in a way in which false propositions do not. But for this purpose it is necessary to revert to image-propositions instead of word-propositions. Let us suppose that in the image the window is to the left of the door. If in fact the window is to the left of the door, there is a correspondence between the image and the objective; there is the same relation between the windows and the door as between the images of them.

This, it might be suggested, is the sort of thought that even a Cartesian disembodied mind might conceivably entertain, without knowing any language. It is, moreover, the sort of thought that Descartes, the author, might report and describe as readily in Latin as Russell here does in English. From outside the veil of doubt he, as author, could report (not translate) thoughts thus entertained behind the veil. The terms employed (“window,” “door,” etc.) would be general but the thoughts reported (of this window, this door, etc.) would be particular. And any complications with regard to the thoughts’ origination (light, eyes, nerves, brain, etc.) could be postponed for consideration later in the Meditations.

Even in this conveniently simple illustration, far removed from talk about the self and its thinking, one may wonder about the stated location of the window to the “left” of the door; for that description relates the scene to the viewer, and in Descartes’ restricted scenario there is as yet no viewer. Ballard could pass this test, but not a pure, bodiless mind. More generally and importantly, it is doubtful (as Descartes himself would stress) whether any of the thoughts that he attributes to his disembodied self could consist simply of images. What mere imaginative flow might he be reporting when, for example, he writes, as above: “Is it not one and the same ‘I’ who is now doubting almost everything, who nonetheless understands some things, who affirms that this one thing is true, denies everything else, desires to know more, is unwilling to be deceived, imagines many things even involuntarily, and is aware of many things which apparently come from the senses?” Necessarily, such thinking as this would depend heavily on language. Yet Descartes has not equipped his pure mind with any language.

It is revealing now, in retrospect, to compare this fruitless beating-about with Descartes’ remarks in the Principles of Philosophy. “Matters which are very

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simple and self-evident,” he observes, “are only rendered more obscure by logical definitions, and should not be counted as items of knowledge which it takes effort to acquire.”31 Thus,

when I said that the proposition *I am thinking, therefore I exist* is the first and most certain of all to occur to anyone who philosophizes in an orderly way, I did not in saying that deny that one must first know what thought, existence and certainty are, and that it is impossible that that which thinks should not exist, and so forth. But because these are very simple notions, and ones which on their own provide us with no knowledge of anything that exists, I did not think they needed to be listed.32

The like, it seems, might be said of the language we employ (as here). That we know, unreflectively. The meanings of its terms are, in a sense, “self-evident”: they “take no effort to acquire.” And the attempt to craft logical definitions for each of them would indeed be an endless, thankless undertaking. So, no problem: Descartes can pass on.33

This revealing vein of thought leads back to Descartes’ *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*. There he writes, in similar fashion: “it is impossible to form any corporeal idea which represents for us what knowledge or doubt or ignorance is, or the action of the will, which may be called ‘volition,’ and the like; and yet we have real knowledge of all of these, knowledge so easy that in order to possess it all we need is some degree of rationality.”34 Plus, again, some knowledge of how these things “may be called.” But for Descartes, again, this linguistic knowledge hardly merits mention. We acquire it from early infancy. Reflecting, however, on the recent literature devoted to concepts such as those Descartes here cites—for example, the little word “know”—one reads with astonished interest his remarks about their utter simplicity. Granted, the concepts’ complexity may lie as much in the eye of the puzzled beholder as in its object. Still, these remarks of Descartes’ strikingly attest the invisibility of language.

Children have no difficulty, say, with “hotter” and “colder”; yet the study of comparatives, in just the English language, could occupy a semester. And the gap

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31Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings*, I, 195.
33Cf. Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings*, II, 418: “In order, then, to know what doubt and thought are, all we need do is to doubt and to think. The same applies to existence: to know what that is, all we need do is to understand the meaning of the word, for that tells us at once what the thing is which the word stands for, in so far as we can know it. There is no need here for a definition, which would confuse rather than clarify the issue.”.
34Ibid., 44-45.
between unreflective mastery and reflective awareness stretches far wider for notions such as Descartes cites (his “simple natures”!). Yet he goes on to assert:

it is evident that we are mistaken if we ever judge that we lack complete knowledge of any one of these simple natures. For if we have even the slightest grasp of it in our mind—which we surely must have, on the assumption that we are making a judgement about it—it must follow that we have complete knowledge of it. Otherwise it could not be said to be simple, but a composite made up of that which we perceive [“percipimus”] in it and that of which we judge we are ignorant [“ignorare”].35

Notice here the shift, innocent in appearance, from what we do or do not perceive to what we do or do not know. According to the Principles of Philosophy, such perceiving counts as a species of thought: “By the term ‘thought,’ I understand everything which we are aware of as happening within us, in so far as we have awareness of it.”36 Later, in the Fourth Replies, Descartes can therefore declare: “As to the fact that there can be nothing in the mind, in so far as it is a thinking thing, of which it is not aware, this seems to me to be self-evident.”37 It is self-evident if “in the mind” means “in consciousness”; but what we know, judge, or grasp as we think and speak extends far beyond consciousness. In particular, the whole grammar and semantics of our words do not then pass through our minds. In the context of the present study, on “Invisible Language,” the significance of the notion that we have complete conscious awareness of our conceptual system can hardly be overemphasized.38

So Descartes’ response, in the Sixth Replies, should rivet our attention: “It is true that no one can be certain that he is thinking or that he exists unless he knows what thought is and what existence is. But this does not require reflective knowledge. . . . It is quite sufficient that we should know it by that internal awareness which always precedes reflective knowledge.”39 This “internal awareness” might be compared with Plato’s acquaintance with the non-linguistic Forms. For there is no hint, here, that in order to know and say what thought or existence is, one might need to know the meaning of the words “thought” and

35Ibid., 45. Cf. Descartes’s explication of the term “idea”, in the Second Replies: “I understand this term to mean the form of any given thought, immediate perception of which makes me aware of the thought. Hence, whenever I express something in words, and understand what I am saying, this very fact makes it certain that there is within me an idea of what is signified by the words in question” (The Philosophical Writings, II, 113).
36Descartes, The Philosophical Writings, I, 195.
37Descartes, The Philosophical Writings, II, 171.
38Cf. Cottingham, Descartes, 115.
“existence”\textsuperscript{40}; or that this requirement might introduce complexity far beyond “internal awareness” and not readily available to reflection; or that in philosophy, if not in less speculative discourse, one might need to take cognizance of this complexity. It seems that for Descartes the passage from nonlinguistic acquaintance to linguistic expression occasions no more misgivings than it did for Plato in the \textit{Phaedo}.

These pregnant passages from other sources help to explain Descartes’ inadequate attention to language in the \textit{Meditations}; and my probings have suggested, in a preliminary way, how inadequate that attention was. I have not attempted a rigorous demonstration that none of my four suggested solutions (the only ones I could envision) can succeed in resolving the problem that language poses for Descartes’ proposed foundation. I do not need to. For it is clear that he did not recognize the problem and its seriousness for his enterprise or propose any solution to it. It is clear, furthermore, that any answer he did propose would not pass the test of indubitability that led to his choice of the \textit{cogito} (the pure thinking self) as his firm starting point. It is evident, therefore, that the \textit{cogito} cannot serve as such a foundation, in the manner that Descartes desired and that Peter Markie thus describes:

Descartes’ claim to certainty about his thought and existence is central to his general program in epistemology. He wants to answer skepticism, and he wants to do so within foundationalism, the view that all our knowledge begins with some self-evident beliefs which are not evidenced by any others but yet provide our justification for all the rest we know. To succeed in this program, Descartes must define the set of self-evident beliefs and show that its membership is both certain and extensive enough to support the rest of our knowledge about the world.\textsuperscript{41}

In the words of Descartes’ dialogue \textit{The Search for Truth}, “from this universal doubt, as from a fixed and immovable point, I propose to derive the knowledge of God, of yourself, and of everything in the universe.”\textsuperscript{42} The risk in such an undertaking, as the First Meditation notes, is that “once the foundations of a building are undermined, anything built on them collapses of its own accord.”\textsuperscript{43} My remarks in this opening section suggest that, to the extent that Descartes built

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\textsuperscript{40}Cf. Descartes, \textit{The Philosophical works}, II, 66, quoted below. [find in Writings**]
\textsuperscript{41}Markie, “The Cogito and Its Importance,” 34.
\textsuperscript{42}Descartes, \textit{The Philosophical Writings}, I, 409.
\textsuperscript{43}Descartes, \textit{The Philosophical Writings}, II, 12.
\end{flushright}
his edifice on the *cogito*—the bodiless self and its thoughts--he built on shifting sand.