

MARTIN LENZ

## Did Descartes Read Wittgenstein? A Dialogical Approach to Reading

Did Descartes read Wittgenstein? You will be pleased to hear that historians of philosophy as well as philosophers deny this. Historians will tell you that Descartes is a philosopher of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and Wittgenstein is a philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Philosophers will agree but hasten to add that Wittgenstein *rightly* attacked Descartes' concept of mind. As you all know, Descartes famously claimed that all our knowledge is rooted in introspection: 'That *I* think is absolutely certain. About *you* I cannot be so sure. Wittgenstein attacked this idea, claiming that introspection or gazing inside cannot yield knowledge, since knowledge and thinking are based on social interaction. So both historians and philosophers will tell you that Descartes didn't read Wittgenstein.

However, on closer inspection we can see that they deny the connection between these authors for contradictory reasons. The historian denies it, claiming that you should *not* try to understand an earlier author such as Descartes through a later author. So the historian opposes anachronism. By contrast, the philosopher denies the connection *because* she reads anachronistically: She reads Descartes through the eyes of the later author, that is, through Wittgenstein. Thus, we have a methodological contradiction. So should we or should we not look at Descartes through Wittgensteinian eyes?

As I see it, we should read historical work with a view to contemporary themes, bringing the history of philosophy to bear on current issues, and vice versa. After all, we always bring our presuppositions along when we read old texts. The point, then, is not to shun or deny anachronistic presuppositions, but to make them as explicit as possible.<sup>1</sup> Interesting as this might sound, given what I just said, this seems to be a somewhat hopeless endeavour. If these moves are contradictory, then they seem to be mutually exclusive. In methodological debates about the

<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of my inaugural lecture at Groningen University in 2017. I am grateful to Oliver Toth for his insightful comments on the latest draft. – See on the relation between philosophical or appropriationist as opposed to historical or contextualist approaches Laerke, Schliesser, and Smith 2013.

history of philosophy, this contradiction is often labelled by distinguishing two approaches: rational reconstruction versus historical reconstruction. While the former seems to focus on assessing arguments by current standards, the latter seems to attempt to be true to the historically pertinent standards. Taking the apparent contradiction between standards as decisive, one might conclude that only one approach gets things right. In this spirit, Christia Mercer recently argued that the friction has now been resolved in favour of historical reconstruction or contextualism.<sup>2</sup> However, even if these moves were to contradict one another, this doesn't mean that only one of them should be followed. As I hope to show, there are good reasons to embrace the apparent contradictions and opt for a plurality of approaches. As I see it, paying attention to the relation between contemporary philosophy, on the one hand, and distant historical periods, on the other, is not only interesting, but also methodologically vital. Why? Well, if we're interested in understanding concepts, such as, for instance, the concept of mind, we need to correct for each other's biases, and this means, amongst other things, making contradictions explicit.

In what follows, I will illustrate this by bringing the two negative answers to the initial question together and form a positive, *synthetic answer*: Yes, Descartes did read Wittgenstein. At least the Descartes *in my mind*, and most certainly in yours, too. Because if someone, who has read Wittgenstein, reads Descartes, he or she will bring the two authors into a dialogue. My aim in doing so is not to present a new interpretation of Descartes or Wittgenstein. Much of what I say will appeal to what by now are standard readings. Moreover, my illustration treats these authors as interchangeable with other examples. So instead of adding to existing interpretations I wish to address the legitimacy of combining different and perhaps even disparate approaches to philosophy and its history.

In defending the synthetic answer to the above question, then, I will show that historians and philosophers need each other. But the reason is not just that collaboration is a nice thing to have; the reason lies in the fact that both philosophers and historians need to *understand* the concepts they are dealing with, and understanding is as much a philosophical as it is a historical endeavour.

## I. UNDERSTANDING CONCEPTS

What then does it mean to *understand concepts*? – As a historian of philosophy, I'm mainly interested in what makes concepts, ideas or ideologies grow. Of course, there are other units – like for instance arguments, debates, the fate of texts or events – that we might study. But concepts, such as the concepts of mind,

<sup>2</sup> See Mercer 2019 as well as Weinberg 2019 for initial responses by Charlie Huenemann, Eric Schliesser, and myself.

language, love or freedom, and certain ideas or even ideologies related to them form a lasting repertoire in philosophy. At the same time, such philosophical concepts and ideas are very changeable.<sup>3</sup> As I see it, concepts and other forms of ideas spread and take hold in our minds over time. Likewise, they might be forgotten and vanish again or be replaced by more fashionable ones. So understanding concepts or ideas does not merely involve asking whether the claims related to them are true or consistent; it also requires considering the conditions under which they stick or disappear. Understanding concepts or ideas, then, requires not only spelling out certain necessary and sufficient conditions, but also the historical conditions that make them attractive.

You might compare this to drawing a map of a town. Of course, if you want to get by, it might be enough to have a map of the current layout of Groningen. So you know where to find the station and the university etc. But for understanding how the town works or how to shape its future, you need to know different historical stages. Why, for instance, did people make certain decisions about the architecture, about building this or that road? Why do people stick to certain features, why do so many protest against introducing a tram line?

The same goes for understanding concepts, ideas, and ideologies. If you just want to use a word, a grasp of the current use might seem to be sufficient. But if you want to understand the conflicts that surround our words and ideas, you need extra guidance. Now philosophers often ask why we should bother with historical meanings when we only want to get by in current discussions. However, the factors that make ideas attractive to us now, are mostly already established *before* we enter the scene. Arguably, it's mostly a *past* set of ideas or ideology that we work from, not something we would or even could make up on the spot. To understand our very own concepts, then, we need a conceptual geography, mapping the past and present territories and climates in which certain ideas grow while others decline. As I will suggest now, this requires the interaction between historians and philosophers, and thus of apparently contradictory approaches. Therefore, I will now return to the question whether Descartes read Wittgenstein, and walk you through three possible answers.

<sup>3</sup> Ad hoc, I take a concept to be a more basic unit related to words expressing it. I often use "concept" interchangeably with "idea". In some contexts, I take "ideas" to mean concepts as figuring in specific claims, so somewhat larger units, like a set of beliefs, expressed by (sets of) sentences. In this way, we can distinguish between 'the concept of mind' and 'Wittgenstein's idea (or concept) of mind'. Although I am not committed to a technical understanding of "idea" here, I find much of what I think echoed and indeed expressed in a much better way than I could in Queloz 2021. ch. 1. By contrast, "ideologies" are more pervasive units comprising whole systems of ideas, beliefs and attitudes. Most importantly, I don't take "ideology" always to have a pejorative ring, as I don't believe that there is a non-ideological state of thinking or discussion. If pressed, I would align my understanding of ideologies with that of Smith 2021. 158–177.

## II. ANSWER ONE: THE HISTORIAN'S TALE

For many years, I have been particularly interested in the history of the concept of mind. Even if there is a lot to explore inside and outside the historical and contemporary canon, it is quite fruitful to look closely at both Descartes and Wittgenstein. What assumptions do they and other people make when they say that someone has a mind? Mapping out the geography of this concept is particularly exciting and indeed pressing. Why? Well, in recent years we have witnessed perhaps crucial changes even in the public understanding of that concept. For thousands of years the concept of mind has been reserved for humans, but now we are wondering whether to ascribe minds to other animals and perhaps even plants and machines.<sup>4</sup> Such conceptual applications need a certain historical climate, and I for one welcome the fact that we increasingly discuss thinking in non-human animals. But at the same time it's crucial to see that we can't change concepts at will. We have to see where we stand. Concepts might be more or less apt; the *boundaries* of concepts shift historically, and that also means: in accordance with *political* fashions.

Do we think of the mind more like Descartes or more in the fashion of Wittgenstein? Are we ready to tie thought to a lesser degree to introspecting individuals and more to certain types of behaviour? Here, for instance, a thorough understanding of our Cartesian and Wittgensteinian heritage is vital. But before we can answer such questions we have to map out what these concepts entail. Are they mutually exclusive?

So back to the question whether Descartes read Wittgenstein! The first answer I'd like to call the "historian's tale". In some sense, it is the most natural answer, namely a firm "no", shrugging off the question as silly, as a plain form of anachronism. Of course, once you know your dates, you can't ask that question sincerely, or can you?

Well, why not? A plain answer is that historians should avoid anachronism, and describe what past philosophers wrote or meant in a way that is true to their own standards.<sup>5</sup> That means we might explain their work in virtue of earlier but certainly not of *later* philosophers. The thesis is that reading Wittgenstein will tell us nothing about Descartes. Put in our geographical analogy, the historian has a true map of the concept of mind in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, because she doesn't insert places that aren't there. This is what it means to avoid anachronism.

At first glance this is pure common sense. Of course, Descartes did not read Wittgenstein. But does that also mean that reading Wittgenstein can tell us nothing about Descartes? Let me consider two objections to the historian's an-

<sup>4</sup> See on animal minds Millikan 2004, on plant cognition Calvo and Keijzer 2009, and on artificial minds Franklin 1995.

<sup>5</sup> The charge of anachronism is very common but very rarely discussed at length. See for some critical discussion Rorty 1984 and Adamson 2016.

swer. Firstly, this answer ignores the fact that philosophers and other authors often write for *future generations*. Descartes, Spinoza, but also Kant, Nietzsche and others were clearly writing decidedly *for* future audiences. To explain their texts only by reference to their time impoverishes their philosophical potential. In fact, this point generalises: any research project is future-directed. We would not begin to do research, had we not the hope that it might lead to more knowledge in the future. If we study the development of ideas, it's crucial to look at their potential futures, and this could very well involve Wittgenstein's reaction to the Cartesian concept of mind.<sup>6</sup>

But in cutting off the past from the present and future, the historian's charge against anachronism raises a deeper worry. It pretends that we can look at a past text while ignoring *our own* beliefs. In other words, it presupposes that we can understand the meaning of sentences without taking them to be true or false. I think that this is an impossible scenario. Let me give you a simple example: If I claimed now that "the current reader of this text is a bird", you would immediately see that this sentence is false. The point is: You could not understand the sentence without acknowledging that it is false. This entails that you can't grasp the meaning without knowing what would have to be the case for it to be true.<sup>7</sup>

The same is true of reading a historical text. If you think that Wittgenstein is right, then – it seems – you can't read Descartes without thinking that he is wrong. So the historian's assumption that you can approach Descartes without Wittgenstein is an illusion. Generally speaking, reading past texts only in terms of their own temporal context is an illusion; it turns the past into a disconnected point without any ties to the present. Thus, the historian's insistence on avoiding anachronism is not feasible because the very acts of writing and reading are anachronistic endeavours.

### III. ANSWER TWO: THE PHILOSOPHER'S TALE

So did Descartes read Wittgenstein? The philosopher's answer has two parts: "No, he did not. But he *should* have done." Why? Well, Descartes obviously assumed that knowledge is based on introspective acts of an individual human mind. Had Descartes read Wittgenstein, he would have seen that this idea raises an enormous problem. Why? Knowing requires the possibility to get it wrong. But distinguishing between right and wrong requires social interaction. Getting something wrong means to deviate from social rules. Without others who can correct me it doesn't make sense to speak of errors. – Arguably, this kind of

<sup>6</sup> Here, I mainly draw on what Schliesser 2013 calls "philosophic prophecy".

<sup>7</sup> In this regard, I follow Davidson in claiming that meaning is established in virtue of what we hold true, not the other way round. See on Davidson's semantics Kemp 2012. 65–86.

objection to Descartes runs through the works of Wittgenstein, Ryle, right up to authors like Davidson and the psychologist Michael Tomasello. The upshot of the objection is: Descartes and other early modern thinkers, such as Spinoza, Locke and Hume, just misconstrue what the mind is by ignoring its social dimension. Thus, the early modern notion of thinking is inconsistent and inferior to 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century concepts of the mind.<sup>8</sup> In terms of our geographical analogy, then, the current philosopher has a better map of the concept of mind, because it's a current map with all the latest achievements.

However, there are severe problems with the philosopher's approach, too. Dismissing the Cartesian idea of mind as inferior rests on the assumption that we have a *better* idea of the mind than Descartes. This is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it takes the canonical understanding of the Cartesian idea of mind as a given and the past as something *already known*. Rather than looking for an answer to the objection, it merely dismisses Descartes' idea. Why do we assume that we know enough about Descartes? The fact that we criticise him, might of course mean that he held a bad view. But it doesn't rule out the possibility that we just don't understand his view very well.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, in doing so, the philosopher ignores the fact that the current concept of mind as socially grounded is a historically grown idea as well. So while the historian isolates the past, the philosopher is in danger of disconnecting the present (and the present standards of validity and rationality) from the past, by seeing her own standards as miraculously exempt from historical conditions and limitations. But this is an illusion. The fact that a philosopher currently endorses a certain concept of mind does not *eo ipso* make it *better* than the historical alternatives that have been excluded.<sup>10</sup>

Now, someone seeing philosophy as aligned to science or technology might object that such advancements are also reflected in philosophy. Accordingly, philosophical theories might be said to make progress and become better over time. Of course, we recognise such progress in our own thinking. For instance, we might set out defining a term and then refine the definition or account by integrating thoughts and insights that are new to us. Something similar applies to larger projects running for many years. However, the notion of progress presupposes a fixed project. After all, progress is a teleological notion requiring an aim that must be shared between the interlocutors. Yet, if the aim of philosophical

<sup>8</sup> Such caricature of objections against the early modern concept of mind is most clearly developed in Ryle. See for a discussion Lenz 2022. 1–29.

<sup>9</sup> Descartes' so-called dualism is standardly used and taught as a contrast to contemporary ideas about the mind. This way, a number of important tenets get distorted. See for example Francks 2008. 9–74.

<sup>10</sup> This kind of assumption rests on the widely contested idea that temporally later stages coincide with a progress in the discipline. See, for instance, Lenz 2019 for a critical discussion of Scott Soames's recent book.

efforts shifts or changes, the talk of progress becomes problematic or even vacuous. In this sense, later philosophers might be said to have not necessarily improved the understanding of a concept but rather *changed the topic* or at least the focus. For instance, it is one thing to ask for the concept of mind in relation to a supposed divine mind. It is quite another thing to ask for the concept of mind in relation to human behaviour. Although there might be interesting overlap between such approaches, it would be difficult to say they form part of the same project such that one concept could be seen as a straightforward improvement over the other and thus “better” than the former.

So the question the philosopher should ask is: What is it exactly that makes Wittgenstein’s thought so attractive? I think one crucial answer is that Wittgenstein shifts the attention from understanding the mind as something that represents objects to something that is embedded in social behaviour. Accordingly, you get a new concept of correctness, one that is not rooted in representation. Instead Wittgenstein thinks of correctness as something governed by conformity not to represented facts, but to social rules of how to behave.

Now so far, it seems that Wittgenstein and Wittgensteinians are far apart from Descartes’ concept of mind. But what would happen if Descartes actually read Wittgenstein? I think Descartes would exclaim that he agrees with Wittgenstein in some crucial points. Let’s therefore move on to the synthetic approach.

#### IV. ANSWER THREE: THE SYNTHETIC APPROACH

I hope it has become clear that both the historian’s and the philosopher’s tales start from plausible assumptions but have weaknesses that render them problematic. However, the good news is that, taken jointly, philosophy and history have tools to balance each other’s biases. To illustrate this, let’s look at the synthetic answer: “Yes, Descartes has read Wittgenstein – insofar as Descartes is considered by someone who has read Wittgenstein”. Assuming then that you are familiar with Wittgenstein’s writings, the Descartes in your mind is one that has read Wittgenstein. You might of course retort that this is a cheap kind of game to combine contrary perspectives. But at this point I have to ask you to consider this point carefully. So what is special about the synthetic answer? The main point is perhaps that our reading of a text is never exhausted by the focus on that particular text. Rather, our engagement takes place between texts. As such, this is nothing but the phenomenon known as intertextuality, the fact that texts and our understanding of them always involve other texts.<sup>11</sup> You don’t wake up in the morning and think “I think, therefore I am”. Speech acts and thus texts should be seen as responses to other texts that in turn prompt further

<sup>11</sup> See on intertextuality Margolis 1995. ch. 5.

texts. Accordingly, texts are woven into one another, even when this is not made explicit through straightforward quotations. A claim settles a question, even if the question remains implicit in the text in which the answer occurs. As readers, however, we often read texts in response to our own questions and unavoidably on the grounds of our mostly tacit assumptions. In this sense, “reading is a dialogical act” from the start, establishing relations between texts and producing new responses in our minds.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, texts always also speak to future audiences. Thus, the understanding of a text by a future audience that comes with new assumptions and questions should not, or at least not in principle, be seen as an anachronistic distortion.

The intertextual features can be considered both from the writer’s and the reader’s perspective. Seen from the writer’s perspective, future readings going beyond what a text claims might even be an intended feature of certain genres. A scientific paper can open further conversation and can even be written with the intention that future insights will inform readers and allow them to confirm or contradict. In our daily conversations, we recognise this phenomenon, too, when our attempts to formulate a coherent thought are met with a more succinct paraphrase and we exclaim that this is what we “actually meant to say”. Seen from the reader’s perspective, it is reasonable to admit that we cannot simply bracket our own assumptions. If our reading of Descartes is built on assumptions informed by Wittgensteinian and other later ideas, it is not sensible to pretend that they are not there. Instead we should make these assumptions as explicit as possible so as to enter into a genuine dialogue with the text. If we find that we don’t understand or disagree, for instance, our reaction should not be to say that we ought not to make anachronistic demands. Rather, we could turn to ourselves and ask (in view of the text) why it is that we disagree. This way, the text puts a spotlight on our own expectations and assumptions. Again, we notice such expectations in our daily interactions when realising that we had expected, say, a different conclusion to be drawn and that “we had not seen this coming”. This way, we approach a position from which we might be able to say why a conclusion surprises us but does follow for the author. In this sense, the text does not merely afford us something to disagree with but a clue as to what tacit expectations guide our reading. Of course, this interactive process is much more complex than that. What I am trying to gesture at is that a dialogical approach integrates historical and philosophical perspectives without having to construe them as opposites. On the contrary, intertextuality seems to require a joint approach. As I see it, then, taking a decision between what is called a historical and a rational reconstruction is not an either-or matter but one of emphasis. As such, neither is superior, because they require one another.

<sup>12</sup> I take over this fitting phrase from Klein 2013. 156.

If this is right, it entails that we shouldn't look for "the correct" approach to texts in the history of philosophy. Historical contextualism or rational reconstruction emphasise different aspects in a dialogical engagement with the text. If philosophers ignore contexts because they deem them irrelevant, they overlook that their own judgements of relevance are just as contingent and contestable as they think forgotten texts are. If historical contextualists chide philosophers for ignoring the contexts, they overlook the fact that a crucial aim of philosophical reading lies in understanding, not merely a historical source, but one's own assumptions, in confrontation with seemingly strange texts. But contextualist engagement with historical sources is equally misconstrued, if it is construed as obeying mainly to a "getting history right constraint".<sup>13</sup> It is important to see, then, that the shift of emphasis does not merely concern the methodological approach to texts, but also the aim of approaching them. If the engagement is dialogical, this means that the aim is not merely to learn about historical texts or enrich the canon, but also to learn about our assumptions. Historical reading involves a meeting of minds, not the mere study of past minds. Thus, when the aim shifts from understanding past others to current selves, it is justified that the approach emphasises rational over historical reconstruction.

#### V. A DIALOGICAL READING OF DESCARTES AND WITTGENSTEIN

A key aspect of dialogical reading is that it doesn't merely target a text as a singular remote historical object. Rather, it engages with the historical text in such a way that it also allows for targeting the reader's assumptions as well as the text and related texts under scrutiny. In this respect, the focus of reading should be expected to shift. So the inquiry doesn't merely concern (1) Descartes' concept of mind, but also (2) our response to this concept, and (3) our (perhaps) Wittgensteinian assumptions guiding our response. These points may well be approached from what we often call standard readings and then zoom in on crucial points of contact in given texts. I've tried to suggest sketches of such standard readings of Descartes and Wittgenstein in the previous sections without going into any textual discussion. Yet taken as such, these points might still seem quite static even if more textual discussions were presented. However, as I see it, these steps are merely to be seen as starting points. In addition to these steps, there is the question of what we can learn from such dialogical confrontations about (4) Descartes' concept of mind and about (5) our Wittgensteinian assumptions. After all, so-called standard readings make a helpful starting point,

<sup>13</sup> In this regard, I disagree with Mercer 2019 who, rather than spelling out the aims of historical inquiry, suggests that historical study is guided by the "Getting Things Right Constraint".

but they shouldn't obscure the fact that much of our history (and of our tacit assumptions) has remained unknown and is still to be made explicit.

In the light of these more general remarks, I'd like to make some brief suggestions regarding points (4) and (5). Let me begin by summarising two insights for our reading of Descartes and Wittgenstein that follow from the synthetic approach.

- Like many before and after him, Descartes wrote for future generations. As is well known, Descartes was keen to have his famous *Meditations* published with objections and replies.<sup>14</sup> Wittgenstein's engagement can be construed as another possible objection to the Cartesian concept of mind. Even if one does not agree with Wittgenstein's approach to the Cartesian tradition, there is no principled reason to exclude Wittgenstein's or indeed anyone's from the list of legitimate responses to Descartes. Accordingly, the charge of anachronism misconstrues even the spirit in which the *Meditations* were published.
- By confronting Descartes with Wittgenstein we can also learn something about our Wittgensteinian heritage that still guides current trends of anti-individualism. However, this anti-individualistic understanding of Descartes' philosophy is not owing to Descartes' texts, but probably mainly to the textbook surveys of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Arguably, it's not Descartes but *Wittgenstein* and other 20<sup>th</sup>-century authors who are obsessed with discussing individualism. As I see it, then, this way of reading Descartes is crucially driven by our assumptions. This doesn't delegitimise this reading, but arguably it can be shown as owing more to an emphasis on our own or 20<sup>th</sup>-century concerns than those that inform Descartes's reasoning.<sup>15</sup>

In the light of such considerations, historians of philosophy often tend to "correct the record" by exposing a certain reading as anachronistic. As I have already noted, it might be more interesting to look at the anachronistic assumptions as contributions to the dialogue. So I'd like to suggest that we can learn something new about our own interpretive assumptions instead. If we abstain from reducing our question to the issue of which reading is less anachronistic, we can be open to highlighting the different texts or aspects that inform our understanding. Rather than asking whose reading is correct, we might ask how Descartes could or likely would have responded to Wittgenstein's charges. A crucial point to note is that we should not take any standard reading as a given. Indeed, we should not even assume that we already know Descartes' position all too well. Simply saying that Descartes' concept of mind is or is not individualistic de-

<sup>14</sup> See Ariew 2015.

<sup>15</sup> See for further Discussion Lenz 2022, esp. ch. 1, and Avramides 2000.

prives us of *imagining* what Descartes might have said when confronted with the charge of individualism.

So what might Descartes have replied? While this is not the space to go into an exhaustive discussion, a few suggestions might be in order. Descartes could have said that his concept of mind does have a social dimension. Although the point has been made before,<sup>16</sup> it is still often ignored that Descartes does not start from an individualistic understanding of the mind. Arguably, his concept of the mind is a social one in two senses. First, in the sense that he begins the *Meditations* by doubting all the prejudices that we are raised with. If Descartes thinks that we need to free ourselves from popular beliefs, then his assumption must be that the normal state of our mind is that it is populated with beliefs of others, be it through our upbringing or some more focused education. However, there is a second social dimension as well, which is not immediately apparent. As is well-known, Descartes thinks of the human mind always in relation to God's mind. Just as in many medieval conceptions, the early modern mind is taken to be social in that it is seen in relation to God. More to the point, it's the relation to God that determines the truth and falsity of our ideas. According to Descartes' understanding, God grants the truth of our ideas, and it's the deviation from the divine will and standards that constitutes our falling into error.<sup>17</sup> In what sense is this a social account of the mind? Descartes claims that error does not arise from the misrepresentation of an object as such. Rather, I can err because my will reaches farther than my intellect. So my will might extend to the unknown, deviating from the true and the good. And this way I can be said to err and sin. Bringing together error and sin, Descartes appeals to a longstanding tradition that places error on the level of voluntary judgment and action. Accordingly, there is no sharp distinction between moral and epistemic errors. I can fail to act in the right way or I can fail to think in the right way. The source of my error is, then, not that I misrepresent objects but rather that I deviate from the way that God ordained. This is the way in which even perfect cognitive agents such as fallen angels and demons can err. To a first approximation, then, our mind might be taken to be social in that the truth of our ideas is not a property that obtains merely in virtue of the relation between the mind forming the idea and the object, but rather in that it requires the relation to an authoritative being, God. Arguably, it is our mind's relation to another mind, the mind of God, that grants truth. So, the crucial relation is one between minds, not between mind and object. However, Descartes' account of error also suggests an intriguing point of contact with Wittgenstein that might only become explicit once we anachronistically read Descartes with the later Wittgenstein in mind.

<sup>16</sup> See Burge 2007. 420–439.

<sup>17</sup> See for an instructive discussion Corneanu 2011. 84–90.

So what I am suggesting now is the following: Not only is Descartes' concept of mind social in the sense suggested above. Rather, Wittgenstein's own assumptions about the social mind might be seen as inspired by a tradition that unites both Descartes' and Wittgenstein's accounts of error. Arguably, both have a voluntarist understanding of error. Let me explain.

We should begin by suggesting a parallel way of phrasing Descartes' and Wittgenstein's accounts of error: According to Descartes, error is rooted in a *deviation from divine standards*. According to Wittgenstein, error is rooted in a *deviation from social standards*.<sup>18</sup>

What is significant for the question at hand is that God is taken as presenting us with a standard that we can conform to or deviate from when representing objects. Thus, error is explained through deviation from the divine standard, not through a representational model. Of course, you might object that divine standards are a far cry from social standards and linguistic rules. But what might have served as a crucial inspiration for Wittgenstein are the following three points: putting mental acts on a par with action, explaining error and correctness through a non-representational standard, and having a non-individualistic standard, for it is the *relation* of humans to God that enforces the standard on us. In this sense, error cannot be ascribed to a single individual that misrepresents an object; it must be a mind that is related to the standards set by God.

If we accept this historical comparison at least as a suggestion, we might say that divine standards play a theoretical role in Descartes that is similar to social practice in Wittgenstein. To see this, it is helpful to revert to the distinction between theological intellectualists and voluntarists. Theological intellectualists assume that divine standards can be justified by reference to a more fundamental standard, such that God wills the Good because it is good. By contrast, theological voluntarists assume that something is good precisely because God wills it, not because there is some further standard of goodness. Wittgenstein seems to follow this voluntarist idea when saying: "Following a rule is analogous to obeying an order." (*PI* 206)

How, then, does Wittgenstein see the traditional theological distinction? Given his numerous discussions of the will even in his early writings, it is clear that his work is informed by such considerations. Most striking is his remark on voluntarism reported in Waismann's "Notes on Talks with Wittgenstein" (1956): "I think that the first conception is the deeper one: Good is what God orders. For this cuts off the path to any and every explanation 'why' it is good ..." Here, Wittgenstein clearly sides with the voluntarists.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the idea of rule-following as obedience can be seen perfectly in line with the assumption that erring consists in violating a shared practice, just as the voluntarist tradition that

<sup>18</sup> The following discussion of Wittgenstein's voluntarism is largely based on Lenz 2017.

<sup>19</sup> See Bloor 2002, 126–133, who also discusses Wittgenstein's voluntarism.

Descartes belongs to deems erring a deviation from divine standards. If these suggestions are pointing in a fruitful direction, they could open a path to relocating Wittgenstein's thought in the context of the long tradition of voluntarism. They might downplay Wittgenstein's claims to originality, but at the same time they might render both his work and the tradition more accessible.

What I would like to suggest, then, is that a dialogical reading opens up unusual but instructive ways of looking at Descartes in conversation with Wittgensteinian assumptions. It is unusual in that it highlights Descartes as a proponent of a more social view of the mind and Wittgenstein's semantics as related to the theological tradition of voluntarism. It is instructive in that it opens new avenues of looking at these authors as well as at our own intuitions, which might be more strongly related to ideas of voluntarism than meets the eye. If you emphasise the question of truth and falsity in Descartes and Wittgenstein you see that they both endorse an understanding of error as behavioural deviation. And this is of course vital for the concepts of mind and of error that still inform our approaches in the philosophy of mind and in semantics.

Arguably, there are at least two distinct ways of understanding error. One way is the model of misrepresentation: if you look at gin and think it's water, you misrepresent the facts. Another way is the model of deviation from fixed standards: if you look at gin and think it's water, your mind fails to behave in accordance with the created standards. What might just look like a paraphrase is in fact a different model: the first is a model of representation, the second a model of action or behaviour. Once you accept this distinction, you realise that Wittgenstein's understanding of the mind rests on a model that's older than Descartes and might have been inspired by his reading of Augustine, Descartes, Spinoza or Schopenhauer, who all use this model in different guises.

The attraction of this model is obvious: Taking mental acts as a form of conforming or deviating behaviour allows you to put epistemic errors in the same category as moral errors. When I began to consider authors in line with this model, I first thought I was just being overly anachronistic, but then on re-reading Wittgenstein's notebooks I realised that he takes up these ideas explicitly. In construing deviating behaviour as error, this concept of mind arguably goes a very long way and informs not only Wittgenstein but, for instance, current ideas of embodiment and teleological conceptions of mental content.

## VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

I hope it has become clear that historical and rational reconstructions are a matter of emphasis in a dialogue rather than competing approaches. As I see it, the synthetic approach can provide new insights into the underpinnings salient but

unnoticed in current concepts of the mind. Our current ideas are not better than the old ones; they are just formed in a new climate. But let's return to the methodological point: explicitly confronting philosophical and historical approaches leads to new insights that can inform our understanding of concepts; it balances the biases that each discipline adheres to in isolation. Let's put this once more in terms of our geographical analogy: According to the synthetic approach, the conceptual geographer has both historical maps, that of the 17<sup>th</sup> and of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Now both the philosopher and the historian might object that the synthetic approach doesn't properly distinguish the two maps, and conflates past and present. To this I reply that the distinction between maps is merely a heuristic starting point that begins with more or less canonical readings. But we need to see one map *through* the other, and vice versa. Then the historian of philosophy and the philosopher can begin to learn from one another. What do such exchanges yield? Well, only by looking at different conceptual maps that bring out different details can you begin to appreciate the richness of the conceptual landscape. And this is exactly where we need each other. For the synthetic approaches it's crucial not to confuse the conceptual *maps* with the *landscape* to be mapped. We have to recognise that we are always but a *part* of that vast landscape, we move around and *emphasize* different places in the old and new layers of maps. In view of all the talk there is about the need for "new ideas" to tackle the challenges ahead, let me thus finish with the observation that we might not always need new ideas; sometimes we just need people who *understand* ideas.

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