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Cartesian “Riddles”: Descartes, Words, and Deduction

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Abstract

Traditionally, ‘René Descartes’ is synonymous with ‘method.’ The so-called father of modern science, he is perhaps the systematic and methodological philosopher *par excellence*, a fundamental motivation for his attempt to secede from contemporary thought being the possibility of establishing a universally valid method in the search for truth. In a passage in the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Descartes contrasts his method with what he calls scholastic “[r]iddles,” verbal equivocations that hinder the acquisition of knowledge. In this paper I analyze this notion of riddling and the Cartesian method to posit that, finally, Descartes cannot avoid replicating the very riddles he criticizes, that his ‘revolutionary’ method only generates more riddles to be methodically solved. In short, Descartes’ method is dependent upon words but also calls for the effacement of the very words that constitute it. Words are both a methodological necessity and limitation; a double bind, there is no method without words, but, at the same time, there can be no method *with* words, that is, no *methodo-logos*. In its broadest formulation, Descartes must always at once say too much *and* too little.

To speak of ‘René Descartes’ has always been to speak of ‘method.’ The so-called father of modern science, he is perhaps the systematic and methodological philosopher *par excellence*. Of course, ‘method’ is not entirely univocal throughout Descartes. As Janet Broughton argues, for instance, the “method of universal doubt”¹ that Descartes employs in the *Meditations* is “a distinctive method” from, say, “the general method of discovery” expounded in the *Rules* or “the *general* method” described in the *Discourse*.² Even if these methods vary, however, they are united by the common denominator of Descartes’ notion of deduction, which opens the possibility of establishing a universally valid method in the search for truth (“innate principles,” Descartes calls them).³ Words, we will see, are fundamental to this project. But however essential words might prove for Descartes’ deduction, they simultaneously place limitations on it and even circumvent the acquisition of knowledge according to

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Descartes' own rigorous criteria. In short, Descartes' method depends upon words but also calls for the effacement of the very words that constitute it. Words are both a methodological necessity and limitation; a double bind, there is no method without words, but, at the same time, there can be no method *with* words, that is, no *method-of-logos*.

Descartes himself acknowledges a number of problems that the use of words entails. In his *Rules*, he goes so far as to claim that “in the vast majority of issues about which the learned dispute, the problem is almost always one of words,” and if “philosophers always agreed about the meanings of words, their controversies would almost all be at an end.”⁴ Shortly thereafter, Descartes calls a certain class of these disputes (somewhat scathingly) “[r]iddles,” that is, problems where “the difficulty lies in the obscurity of the language employed.”⁵ Such riddles are to be replaced by the disambiguated and immaterial signs that Descartes requires for the deductions necessary for maximizing human knowledge, but, in what follows, a closer look at both riddles and the Cartesian method will reveal that, according to his own comments on words, Descartes must replicate the very riddles he criticizes. In its broadest formulation, Descartes must always at once say *too much* and *too little*.

Now, on one hand, reading riddles answers to the rules Descartes himself establishes; the critique is therefore immanent to Descartes. On the other hand, the critique is applicable to a number of methods in general, perhaps to methodology in general. However, it must be stressed that the generality of the critique becomes legible only after Descartes, in at least three senses: chronologically *after* the event of Descartes, *after* the manner of Descartes, and *after* Cartesian ends of certainty. In other words, the general applicability of the critique cannot be ascertained outside the specificity of Descartes and the philosophical modernity that he inaugurates. Following Foucault's archaeology, for instance, the first radical discontinuity with the era of “resemblance”⁶ that lasted until the end of the sixteenth century starts with Descartes. Indeed, Foucault cites “the first lines of his *Regulae*” as the first thoughts of a new era, namely, “the age of reason,”⁷ “rationalism” and “the entry of nature, at long last, into the scientific order.”⁸ Foucault elaborates this new order with respect to Descartes' deduction, which, in contrast to “the old system of similitudes” that could at best “achieve steadily increasing probability,” opens the new possibility of a “complete enumeration” through which we can “attain to perfect certainty.”⁹ The reduction to the simplest terms followed by certain steps of increasing complexity should protect knowledge precisely against a critique of excess and deficiency, of too much and too little, and, so, to read riddles is to read a condition of impossibility inscribed in the very possibility of the method itself. But not only the method: If Descartes marks the beginning of philosophical modernity, then that modernity itself is marked from its beginning by a remarkable problem: That which finds itself in the simple terms of certainty is riddled as soon as it attempts—and it must

attempt, we will see—to mark that certainty. Broadly posed through the specificity of Descartes, these are the stakes of the riddles that follow.

To anticipate my movements, in broad strokes there will be three parts. The first sets up a tension threading throughout the Cartesian corpus between scholastic riddles and the use of words in deduction: While riddles equivocate and require excessive focus on words, the use of words in deduction (which cannot be avoided), by contrast, will be ‘economized,’ which is to say disambiguated and, ideally, immaterial so as not to waste any undue attention (the human capacity for which, as Descartes sees it, is severely limited) on mere signs. The second part examines the way in which these economized signs are, finally, impossible according to Descartes’ own comments on words. Words are not only always open to plural referentiality, but they also involve materiality by nature, and not merely incidentally: The materiality of words plays a central role in establishing Descartes’ notorious mind-body dichotomy—and if material, then riddling, i.e. Descartes must always say too much. Finally, in the third part, I turn to the way in which Descartes also says too little. The point is easier to make: Words substitute for presence in deduction, but, of course, signs can never amount to the presence for which they substitute, and Descartes’ expressions, then, are always simultaneously expressions of a desire, which is, significantly, immoral according to the provisional moral code elaborated in the *Discourse* (I:257 ff.) and elsewhere. In sum, words are necessary, but it is also necessary to transcend them; Descartes needs them *and* needs them to disappear since, always too much *and* too little, a mark is always off the mark.

To begin, riddles must be more rigorously defined, and a general look at the contemporary context will help. As noted already, Descartes writes that, “in the vast majority of issues about which the learned dispute, the problem is almost always one of words.” The “learned,” so often the object of Descartes’ criticism, are of course the so-called “schools,”¹⁰ that is, scholasticism as inherited from the Middle Ages.¹¹ The scope of the issue is perhaps best illustrated by the rejection of Cartesian thought by the Senate of the University of Utrecht in 1642, a primary cause for which being that “once [the young] have begun to rely on the new philosophy and its supposed solutions, they are unable to understand the technical terms which are commonly used in the books of traditional authors and in the lectures and debates of their professors.”¹² As John Cottingham notes, “the complaint against Descartes has nothing to do with the substance of his doctrines, but with the fact that it does not employ the ‘technical terms used in the lectures and debates,’”¹³ an obviously shortsighted attack attempting to preserve the language of tradition. And if “[s]cholastic reasoning had in fact become a largely closed system” that consisted more in “the skilful manipulation of terminology” than “the pursuit of truth,” as Cottingham describes it,¹⁴ then one can understand Descartes’ recurrent criticism, such as in his *Principles* where he states that, while his own terms are “sufficiently self-evident,” otherwise simple notions “are only rendered more obscure by

logical definitions, and should not be counted as items of knowledge.”¹⁵ In short, the new Cartesian system is, quite literally, not on speaking terms with tradition.

Against such a tradition, Descartes’ frustration with those who quibble over words or “merely try to carp at individual sentences, as is the fashion,”¹⁶ is perhaps justified. But this frustration can be refined with a closer look at scholastic riddles. Among his examples, Descartes cites “the riddle of the Sphinx about the animal which is four-footed to begin with, then two-footed, and later on becomes three-footed.”¹⁷ Discussing the proper approach, the method for answering such riddles, Descartes maintains that “[w]e must take care not to assume more than the data, and not to take the data in too narrow a sense.”¹⁸ For example, “there is no need to think that the word ‘footed’ refers exclusively to real feet – to animals’ feet”; ‘footed’ refers equally to “a baby’s hands,” an adult’s literal feet, and “figuratively” to “an old man’s walking-stick.”¹⁹ From this we see that Descartes sees riddles functioning from ambiguity, from synonymy²⁰—an essential possibility that language entails since “one can always use one or several [words] to express the same thing”²¹ or, as in the case of the Sphinx, the same word to express several things. In short, “riddles and other enigmas ingeniously contrived to tax our wits”²² thrive with *excess* (and “excess,” we are told in the provisional moral code of the *Discourse*, is “usually bad”),²³ an attempt to misguide the would-be solver into taking the “data” too widely (“more than”) or “in too narrow a sense.”

Significantly, this riddling excess concerns not only multiple referents for a single word but also the word itself: “*The fourth cause of error*,” Descartes writes in the *Principles*, “is that we attach our concepts to words which do not precisely correspond to real things.”²⁴ More specifically, “because of the use of language, we tie all our concepts to the words used to express them; and when we store the concepts in our memory we always simultaneously store the corresponding words”; however, we always “find the words easier to recall than the things; and because of this it is very seldom that our concept of a thing is so distinct that we can separate it totally from our concept of the words involved.”²⁵ In other words, a word always has the potential to interfere with the idea to which it is ‘tied,’ which is why “[t]he thoughts of almost all people are more concerned with words than with things,”²⁶ in short, with riddles—“more than the data.” Hence, riddles concern not only ambiguity, but also *any word in excess of the thing it represents* (which is to say *any word*). This concern with words is not merely a game or innocent pun (even the “riddle answering”²⁷ from *Oedipus* suggests this, judging from the fate its answer incurs for Oedipus and the city of Thebes),²⁸ it is generalizable to “other issues as well.”²⁹ It complicates Descartes’ own epistemology, to which I now turn.

Descartes’ attempt to minimize the potentially distracting effect of riddles is inseparable from his notion of deduction, an explication of which will also serve to underscore the

necessary role of words in the Cartesian method. According to Descartes, certain knowledge is acquired through either intuition or deduction. Intuition is neither “the fluctuating testimony of the senses” nor any other traditional or scholastic notion (“[f]or it would be very difficult for me to employ the same terminology, when my own views are profoundly different”); rather, it is, Descartes writes early in the *Rules*, “the conception of a clear and attentive mind, which is so easy and distinct that there can be no room for doubt about what we are understanding.”³⁰ Deduction, in turn, is “the inference of something as following necessarily from some other propositions which are known with certainty,”³¹ i.e. from intuition or other propositions already deduced from intuition. The intuited link, then, will be the first and simplest principle from which all subsequent knowledge is deduced, the Archimedean point, to borrow an image from the *Meditations*.³² Descartes compares the process on several occasions to “a long chain” in which we can know “the last link” with as much certainty as the “first” and founding link, “provided we survey the links one after the other, and keep in mind that each link from first to last is attached to its neighbor.”³³ So whether the process of deduction is construed, as Cottingham sees it, as “a second-best form of a cognition” that “should be dispensed with altogether, or at least assimilated as closely as possible to intuition,”³⁴ or, as Murray Miles reads it, as merely “successive stages within the order of intuition itself,” a single process that Miles calls “analytic reflexion” that “consists in attending explicitly to what is only implicit in the mind’s intuitive certainty,”³⁵ there remains a certain “*wholly uninterrupted sweep of thought*”³⁶ in which one begins from the certainty of intuition and proceeds deductively, with equal certainty, to all things that can be known (or at least known to be unknowable [cf. I:28]).

But Descartes clearly recognizes certain limitations to the human faculties necessary to perform deductions, however conceived. Although deduction in itself is infallible for Descartes—“none of the errors to which men...are liable is ever due to faulty inference”³⁷—the human intellect’s limited scope and inability “to keep its attention on things without some degree of difficulty and fatigue”³⁸ pose other problems. The long chains of deduction would undoubtedly be on par with intuition if we could attend to every necessary proposition and its relation to the next, but, since “our eyes cannot distinguish at one glance all the links in a very long chain,”³⁹ Descartes asserts that “deduction in a sense gets its certainty from memory”:⁴⁰ “If, for example,...I have come to know first what the relation between the magnitudes A and B is, and then between B and C, and between C and D, and finally between D and E, that does not entail my seeing what the relation is between A and E...*unless I recall all of them.*”⁴¹ But memory is not certain; it “is weak and unstable.”⁴² Not only too “weak” to hold reliably all the steps of a longer deduction, but, if one is not presently attending to a proposition, a memory can be *imagined*, as well. In the *Principles*, Descartes claims that when we give “*our assent to something unclear*” it is often “*because we imagine that we clearly perceived it on some previous occasion,*” and “once these things are committed to memory, we give our assent

to them just as we would if we had fully perceived them, whereas in reality we never perceived them at all.”⁴³ Hence, memory not only threatens the intellect with inaccuracy and inadequacy but also with misremembering, with fabrications made possible by the fact that we cannot keep our present attention on plural propositions.⁴⁴

This leads Descartes to write that memory “must be refreshed and strengthened through [a] continuous and repeated movement of thought.”⁴⁵ By running through the chain from A to E “again and again,” Descartes attempts to ensure that “memory is left with practically no role to play,” since he will “seem to be intuiting the whole thing at once.”⁴⁶ The whole thing at once—“*the continuous and completely uninterrupted train of thought*” must be so swift that we seem to be able “*to form a distinct and, as far as possible, simultaneous conception of several [propositions]*”; although it is a movement of thought, a “*train*,” it must be performed so quickly that the intuition of A and the deduction of B-E “seem to coalesce into a single operation.”⁴⁷ But we are still in the realm of ‘*seeming*,’ since in moving from A to B we can only *remember* A, unable to intuit it and deduce B at the same time. So even though Descartes reassures us that “[i]n this way our memory is relieved, the sluggishness of our intelligence redressed, and its capacity in some way enlarged,”⁴⁸ the problematic of deduction is nonetheless apparent: Absolute certainty consists in clear and distinct perception of simultaneous propositions, but due to the limited capacity of human nature there will always be absent propositions in a given deduction on which we cannot presently focus, and, hence, we are left with a need to both utilize *and* minimize memory, which is both an “asset” and “hindrance.”⁴⁹

Thus the role of words: To reformulate the problematic in a more explicit light, a given proposition (A) must remain present (“simultaneous”) while one moves to the next (B), even though, due to the limitations of the human intellect, by advancing one must abandon the previous proposition (A); that is to say, A must remain *present even in its absence*, and this is precisely the function of words: “in order to keep [multiple propositions] in mind or understand several together, I thought it *necessary* to designate them by the briefest possible symbols.”⁵⁰ By substituting “abbreviated representations” for a given proposition, which will act “as adequate safeguards against lapses of memory,” we free “our present attention”⁵¹ to advance to other propositions or features of propositions; something is written or ‘symbolized’ in order to keep it present in such a way that it does not occupy the conscious mind. As Descartes puts it rather clearly, “we shall leave absolutely nothing to memory but put down on paper whatever we have to retain, thus allowing the imagination to devote itself freely and completely to the ideas immediately before it.”⁵² And Descartes seeks “very concise symbols” not only to alleviate memory more efficiently (“[i]t will thus be impossible for our memory to go wrong”) but also to facilitate the chain of deduction, so that “we may be able...to run through...with the swiftest sweep of thought and intuit as many [propositions] as possible at the same time.”⁵³

More specifically, Descartes' use of signs, in fact, attempts to *de-riddle* words. Two points are to be made. First, the recommended signs are to be univocal: "whatever is to be viewed as *one thing* from the point of view of the problem we shall represent by a *unique symbol*, which can be formed in any way we like."⁵⁴ Second, and more radical and problematic still, these symbols are to be *immaterial*. Armed with his concise, Adamic sign system, in Descartes' own words:

we shall not just be economizing with words but, and *this is the important point*, we shall also be displaying the terms of the problem in such a pure and naked light that, while *nothing useful will be omitted*, *nothing superfluous will be included* – nothing, that is, which might needlessly occupy our mental powers when our mind is having to take in many things at once.⁵⁵

"[N]othing superfluous"—the symbols are to be so brief, so abbreviated and concise, that they are only minimally existent, apparently solving the riddle of the problematically excessive word. This "economizing with words," indeed, aims at eliminating the "*fourth cause of error*" mentioned earlier: Economized words cannot interfere with their concepts since they barely exist; they will not "needlessly occupy our mental powers," and, consequently, to be "more concerned with words than with things" will become impossible. As Jean-Pierre S ris puts it in a different context, Descartes' "perfect transparency" seeks "the pure effacement" of the word "before the very idea it transcribes"; "[t]he sign, giving up its chance to be seen," S ris writes, "in fact gives us the idea to be seen."⁵⁶ For Descartes, who seeks to write his deductions—to borrow an apposite phrase from Derrida—in "white ink,"⁵⁷ "[t]he horizon of the thought...is the elision of the sign."⁵⁸ This is, moreover, another manifestation of the discontinuity that Foucault marks in Descartes: In contrast to the previous era in which "signs were thought to have been placed upon things so that men might be able to uncover their secrets,"⁵⁹ signs now become mere "tools of analysis,"⁶⁰ and language "has entered a period of transparency and neutrality."⁶¹ Specifically, with the immediate transparency of the economized sign system, all excess will be eliminated, the data taken neither too narrowly ("*nothing useful will be omitted*") nor too widely ("*nothing superfluous will be included*"), deduction de-riddled from both the excess of referentiality (disambiguation) and the excess of the sign itself (de-materialization).

Before continuing, I want to stress that the risk of a riddled deduction extends even to the method of doubt in the *Meditations*, which Broughton, for instance, is careful to distinguish from other Cartesian approaches. In the Second Replies, Mersenne suggests that Descartes "set out the entire argument in geometrical fashion" so as to enable each reader to "see everything as it were at a single glance."⁶² Mersenne recycles Descartes'

own phrase here—at a single glance—which Descartes uses recurrently to describe deductions and their ideal simultaneity.⁶³ “I have already followed this method,” Descartes replies. “The order consists simply in this,” he explains: “The items which are put forward first must be known entirely without the aid of what comes later; and the remaining items must be arranged in such a way that their demonstration depends solely on what has gone before.”⁶⁴ Broughton expands upon this order, and her expansion is nothing other than the chain of deduction that we have been considering: “a person who first had the thought that A, would then recognize that B, which in turn would show him that C. The order, A-B-C, is partly a matter of various relations among the propositions designated, but it is also partly a matter of the state of the person at the successive moments at which he entertains A, B, and C, and the ways in which the occurrence of the earlier states may help to bring about the later ones.”⁶⁵ The “order” of the *Meditations*, in short, is a chain of deduction. As Descartes makes clear in the *Search for Truth*, “if you simply know how to make proper use of your own doubt, you can use it to *deduce* facts which are known with complete certainty.”⁶⁶ Resultantly, the method of doubt in the *Meditations* does not escape the double bind of deduction: “at a glance,” says Descartes; “successive moments,” says Broughton. Subject to the same problematic, every order requires economized words, a “geometrical fashion” to subdue the risk of riddles.

The parameters set, I now turn to show that Descartes’ use of signs is nonetheless riddling. The issue of disambiguated words is well-trodden ground and can be dealt with quickly in order to move to the more radical—and more interesting—issue of materiality. Indeed, the problem has already been broached (briefly) with the letter to Mersenne (July 22, 1641) in which Descartes posits that “one can always use one or several [words] to express the same thing.”⁶⁷ However, if words are arbitrary (“any way we like”), then they are not restrained in reference (“except by human convention”),⁶⁸ and, if unrestrained, a sign can always refer multiply, always open to working against Descartes’ prescription of a “unique symbol” for “one thing.” On one hand, beginning in the seventeenth century, the arbitrariness of signs is celebrated. On Foucault’s account, while previous eras maintained a “fidelity to natural signs,” the age of Descartes, inversely, privileges the “conventional sign” since “it is always possible (and indeed necessary) to choose it in such a way that it will be simple, easy to remember,” etcetera; “the man-made sign,” says Foucault, “is the sign at the peak of its activity.”⁶⁹ On the other hand, however, the very arbitrariness that allows Descartes to ‘economize’ in the first place, the radical difference between sign and thing, is the same arbitrariness that will open the word to multiplicity and excess. So, even though Descartes criticizes the equivocation of the scholastic tradition, intentionally or not there is always the possibility of another “thing” being added to a given word. But this does not seem to trouble Descartes or dissuade him from his project. Much more could (and should) be said on this issue, to be sure, but, for the sake of economy, I now turn to the less apparent (but also, materially, more apparent)

problem—namely, the fact that Descartes seeks immaterial words even though words as he recurrently describes *and* employs them always entail an ineffaceable materiality.

To blueprint briefly the rest of this section, I will underscore language as a unique function of the mind-body composition. By emphasizing that words require a body no less than a soul, words themselves will be shown to entail materiality by their very nature, and, if material, then potentially riddling and immune to absolute economization. Further, by illustrating the operative status of Descartes' recurrent analogy between sensations and words, I will be able to posit that the materiality of words in Cartesian philosophy plays an undeniably central role and, resultantly, cannot be ignored. To be seen, *words matter*.

Language as a function of the mind-body composite is perhaps *the* contemporary issue of Cartesian scholarship on language, for language is, according to Descartes, “the only certain sign of thought hidden in a body,”⁷⁰ the mark of the soul that distinguishes humans from animals. But while most focus on the relation of language to the immaterial soul (“*no thought without language*,”⁷¹ the slogan Cottingham designates for the tradition), for my purposes I must focus on the materiality, *the embodiment*, of words. Descartes writes in a letter to Chanut (February 1, 1647) that “[t]he soul’s natural capacity for union with a body brings with it the possibility of an association between each of its thoughts and certain motions or conditions of this body so that when the same conditions recur in the body, they induce the soul to have the same thought.”⁷² Now, for my purposes, I am not so interested in how my soul, that which is “really distinct from my body, and can exist without it,”⁷³ might have a “*natural* capacity for union” with an inessential body (a problem as old as Cartesian thought, first posed by Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia in 1643); of interest here is the fact that in the same letter Descartes’ example for this “association” is, in fact, words: “In the same way..., we connect the letters or the pronunciation of certain words, which are material things, with the meanings, which are thoughts.”⁷⁴ The association between word and thought reflects the association between mind and body, and, hence, words require *both* the material and the immaterial to function, a liminality unique to humans. As Sérís puts it, speech is “the most direct experience and the most immediate proof of the substantial union which constitutes [humans], insofar as it allows communication only between beings who have learned the meanings of words which they can understand and pronounce”:⁷⁵ *understand*, which requires a soul, and *pronounce*, which requires a body. By implication, just as beasts are merely material and therefore cannot speak (“there has never been known an animal so perfect as to use a sign...which bore no relation to its passions”),⁷⁶ a merely thinking thing could not speak either, since it would have no means for sensory pronunciation; in short, God—who has “never been in the senses,”⁷⁷ who is “pure intelligence”⁷⁸—is mute, the alleged “author”⁷⁹ of existence illiterate. The mediation of words is, in effect, the

mediation between the mind and body, and both are necessary for what Descartes calls “real speech.”⁸⁰

The preceding considerations are necessary for a full understanding of one of Descartes’ recurrent analogies between words and the senses, which will shed even more light on the central sense of words. In brief, Descartes posits what might be called a *semiotics of sensation*, namely, the notion that our internal sensations are arbitrary signs that do not necessarily have any resemblance to the external objects that occasion them. If, as Descartes writes in one of his earliest works, *The World*, “we pass a feather gently over the lips of a child... and he feels himself being tickled,”⁸¹ there will be nothing in the sensation of tickling that necessarily resembles the feather itself. This is another modern moment in Descartes, following Foucault, a move away from the “the age of resemblance” and toward “a new kinship between resemblance and illusion” in “the age of deceiving senses.”⁸² Not coincidentally, words are the model with which Descartes makes the move: “Now if words, which signify nothing except by human convention, suffice to make us think of things to which they bear no resemblance, then why could nature not also have established some sign which would make us have the sensation of light, even if the sign contained nothing in itself which is similar to this sensation?”⁸³ Descartes develops this analogy by pointing out that if “we hear only the sounds of some words, without attending to their meaning,” then the “idea of this sound” will be “very different” from the “object which is its cause” (i.e. the object or thought signified): “A man opens his mouth, moves his tongue, and breathes out,” but there is nothing in these “actions” that resembles the resultant concept that we would conventionally “imagine”⁸⁴ upon hearing the word. Indeed, “[m]ost philosophers maintain that sound is nothing but a certain vibration of air which strikes our ears” (Descartes included, cf. *Principles* I:282-283), and, if words, a composite of sound and meaning, were to translate their materiality, they would “make us conceive the motion of the parts of the air which is then vibrating against our ears”⁸⁵ and *not* the thought to which it is tied by convention. But this *error*, this indirection, makes possible communication, since, should words translate their material existence precisely, they would be relegated to the translation of mere vibrations, to the physicality of the sound rather than the syllable that the mind might wield. Communication is hence based upon a miscommunication, the precondition of words according to the logic of Descartes’ semiotics of sensation. So not only are words the exemplar of inaccuracy (and, therefore, already obscure their allegedly ‘transparent’ status in deduction), but, more importantly in the present context, words are the wedge by which Descartes pries a “difference”⁸⁶ between sense and object of sensation.

The importance of this difference is thrown into relief when recognized as a symptom of Descartes’ attempt to identify himself as “only a thing that thinks.”⁸⁷ In other words, the discrepancy can be contextualized within Descartes’ valorization of the mind over the senses. After all, “the one thing” Descartes sets out “to prove” in the *Meditations* is that

the arguments for the existence of “the world” and “bodies” “are not as solid or as transparent as the arguments which lead us to knowledge of our own minds.”⁸⁸ Indeed, on Broughton’s account, emphasis on the semiotics of sensation is the fifth and culminating “substantive principle” at which Descartes aims with the method of doubt: “although pat- terns [sic] of change in our sense experience do reflect patterns of change in the material things that affect us, we should not attribute to material things the qualities with which our sense experience directly acquaints us.”⁸⁹ The symbolic understanding of senses in which the sensation of the thing would naturally correspond to the thing sensed calls for “radical skepticism” in order to “loosen the grip of the senses upon our minds.”⁹⁰ By separating sensory awareness (which is “to be identified” with “*thinking*”)⁹¹ from the object sensed (materiality or any exteriority), Descartes legibly bifurcates the mind and body and is therefore free to hierarchize them,⁹² and this is one of the reasons the concern with the semiotics of sensation will recur in so many major works in some capacity.⁹³ Therefore, insofar as the mind-body distinction plays a central role in Cartesian philosophy, by dwelling on the status of the linguistic analogy that buttresses that distinction we can establish further the pivotal role of material words in Descartes’ philosophy.

First a qualification: One can discern, at least provisionally, two sorts of analogies for Descartes, the merely illustrative and the epistemic. Illustrative analogies are self-explanatory; they do not contribute any knowledge but rather give the facts a certain color, merely allowing one, as Descartes says early in his career, “to philosophize in a more exalted way.”⁹⁴ Epistemic analogies, by contrast, contribute to our understanding; they are necessary for deduction itself: “in all reasoning it is only by means of comparison that we attain an exact knowledge of the truth.”⁹⁵ Specifically, as Descartes explains in a letter to Morin (September 12, 1638), these analogies are a comparison of “things that are too small to be perceived by the senses with other things that can be so perceived, the latter differing from the former simply as a large circle differs from a small one.”⁹⁶ Such analogies, Descartes claims, “are the most appropriate means available to the human mind for laying bare the truth in problems of physics,” and he will “go so far as to say that, when someone makes an assertion concerning nature which cannot be explained by any such analogy, [he thinks he has] demonstrative knowledge that the point is false.”⁹⁷

And the analogy between words and sensation is epistemic. As Sérís points out, “the term-by-term correspondence instituted by God between the shapes or ‘ideas’ ‘traced in spirits on the surface of the [pineal] gland’ [I:106] and the sensations in the mind has all the properties of a lexicon.”⁹⁸ Indeed, sensory experience consists only in signs that we must *read*: “Is it not thus that nature has established laughter and tears, to make us *read* joy and sadness on the faces of men?”⁹⁹ Moreover, sensation is “related exclusively to [the] combination of the human body and mind,”¹⁰⁰ since, while the body receives the

external stimulus, “it is the soul which has sensory perceptions, and not the body,”¹⁰¹ and this mind-body composite, as seen, is the condition of speech as well. To reformulate the case more accurately in light of these considerations, words are an instantiation of the semiotics of sense; a material word is to the thought it engenders as a feather is to the sensation it creates, i.e. tickling. Hence, words help *to understand* the operation of the senses just as “a large circle” helps to understand “a small one,” to reappropriate Descartes’ analogy in his explanation of epistemic analogies. Not coincidentally, then, just as the semiotics of sensation recurs throughout the Cartesian corpus, so, too, does the analogy with words.¹⁰² The gravity of the materiality of words should be clear by now—*words matter*.

To conclude this line of thought, the point to be made here is rather simple: Descartes’ method opposes the matter it addresses. On one hand, Descartes needs an immaterial language in order to circumvent the potential riddling of the concept by the word that represents it; on the other hand, the materiality of words functions in Cartesian philosophy not only as an index of the human condition as an embodied soul but also as an important tool in the prioritization of the mind. Descartes’ desire for *immaterial words* is a symptom of his self-identification as a merely thinking thing, but in developing the discrepancy between the mind and the exterior world that would enable that self-identification, Descartes points to *material words* over and over again. Many consequences can be drawn from this tension, to be sure. For instance, Descartes must use materiality in order to deduce it: His first principles of philosophy concern “immaterial or metaphysical things,” and from these he will “deduce very clearly the principles of corporeal or physical things,”¹⁰³ but, insofar as deduction requires the use of words, and insofar as words are already corporeal, deduction relies on exteriority in deducing it.¹⁰⁴ But the larger problem I am attempting to underscore is the fact that, by Descartes’ own standards, to say anything is always to say too much—and the method cannot keep silent. Along these lines, “economizing with words” is finally impossible.

Now, if Descartes always says too much, he nonetheless always and necessarily says too little as well. To make this point, one must recall that, ideally, deduction consists in keeping all propositions *present* to a fully aware mind: Clarity, “required for mental intuition,”¹⁰⁵ is that which “is *present* and accessible to the attentive mind – just as we say that we see something clearly when it is *present* to the eye’s gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility.”¹⁰⁶ In fact, the “third cause of error” in the *Principles* is due to judgments that are not based upon such a “*present perception*.”¹⁰⁷ Clarity and the preoccupation over presence will even be one of the principal concerns in the *Meditations*. After uncovering the cogito, Descartes admits that his nature “is such that so long as [he] perceive[s] something very clearly and distinctly [he] cannot but believe it to be true,” that is, only at the present moment, only while “attending to the arguments which led [him] to make it.”¹⁰⁸ However, his “nature is also

such that [he] cannot fix [his] mental vision continually on the same thing, so as to keep perceiving it clearly,”¹⁰⁹ thereby opening doors for error. At its best, then, deduction requires the immediate presence of all relevant propositions.

As Descartes employs them in deduction, however, words are only a secondary pseudo-presence, filling in for the absence of the original propositions that we cannot keep present. As Derrida puts it, signs are an “effort of symbolically reappropriating presence,”¹¹⁰ but they never fully amount to presence themselves. Descartes himself recognizes the necessary difference between sign and thing in the *Optics*, where he states that, were “an image to resemble the object it represents in all respects,” then “there would be no distinction between the object and its image”; the “perfection of an image,”¹¹¹ then, lies precisely in its *imperfection*. Words thus function as compensation for what is outside our mental capacity, and the sign, whatever it represents, always simultaneously signals the inaccessibility of the various propositions of a given deduction, indexing our impotence, our desire for certainty alongside our inability to satisfy it. We could even speak of the Cartesian sign in terms of the logic of supplementarity that Derrida has outlined, since words and writing certainly supplement our limited mental capacities. But, as Derrida reiterates on multiple occasions, “if [the supplement] fills, it is as if one fills a void,” that is, it points to “the anterior default of a presence.”¹¹² No number of words can re-fill what was never full, the void, the default, and Descartes, in always saying too much, never says enough.

If I dwell on Descartes’ use of words as the expression of a desire, it is not only to show that he cannot say enough but also that deduction entails *transgression*. For Descartes, “the highest and most perfect moral system” is contingent upon “a complete knowledge of the other sciences,” but, while completing the Olympian task of a totalized body of knowledge, Descartes offers “an imperfect moral code which we may follow provisionally while we do not yet know a better one.”¹¹³ This “provisional moral code,” expounded in the *Discourse*, consists in three moral maxims, the third of which is relevant here: “try always to master [one]self rather than fortune, and change [one’s] desires rather than the order of the world.”¹¹⁴ Descartes holds that “nothing lies entirely within our power except our thoughts,” and, concerning “matters external to us, whatever we fail to achieve is absolutely impossible so far as we are concerned.”¹¹⁵ By “[m]aking a virtue of necessity” and considering “all external goods as equally beyond our power,” Descartes asserts that “we shall not regret the absence of goods which seem to be our birthright when we are deprived of them through no fault of our own.”¹¹⁶ However, instead of considering the propositions that we cannot keep present as “beyond our power,” as Descartes recurrently asserts they are, words address (better, attempt to redress) our limited power of concentration and memory. There is no resignation; the necessary but inaccessible propositions are, in effect, “absent goods” we wish were present.¹¹⁷ If, along with Descartes, “we regard each person’s contentment as the full

satisfaction of all his desires duly regulated by reason,”¹¹⁸ then Descartes—even though the moral code is his formula for happiness, adopted “to live as happily as [he] could”¹¹⁹—is the archetype of disgruntled philosophers. The method, then, is the path to sin, and philosophy, unhappiness. Words, in indexing our desire and discontent, index our sin and moral turpitude, as well.

To conclude, Descartes was most likely aware of the double bind I have been trying to underscore, namely, the inevitability and the necessity of words contra the desire to transcend them. After all, the fourth cause of error from the *Principles* is listed “because of our use of language,” which suggests a certain acceptance of the fact that we cannot escape the use of words. Even the analogy between words and sensation reflects this acceptance, giving words consideration and even an epistemic position beyond what many philosophers thitherto (and thereafter) offered, beyond a tradition that often attempted to disavow such resources completely.¹²⁰ However, that same consideration leads to a characterization of words that problematizes the role Descartes assigns them in deduction, since the mark must miss the mark, overshooting and falling short, invariably off the path, in error. The method, to the extent that it is constituted by words, is always unmethodical, always excessive and uneconomical—tainting with uncertainty, therefore, a certain modernity. In this sense, Descartes’ attempt to distance himself from scholastic equivocation, finally, is not as successful as he claims, judging by the standards he himself establishes. Contra his cure for riddles, *any* use of words forces us both “to assume more than the data” (words add material to the immaterial) and “to take the data in too narrow a sense” (words are always less than presence)—words riddle by nature.

Finally, I note somewhat elliptically that if, as Descartes recurrently reiterates, words and “real speech” are so thoroughly tied to the unique status of humans as embodied souls, “the only certain sign of thought hidden in a body,”¹²¹ then the human condition itself is something of a riddle. I thus close where Nietzsche—who, contrary to Descartes, is notoriously unsystematic—begins, whose final thoughts of the preface to the second edition of *The Gay Science* provide an apposite contrast with which to conclude: While Descartes, from early on, sought to *unmask* the sciences (“[t]he sciences are at present masked, but if the masks were taken off, they would be revealed in all their beauty,”¹²² and words, no doubt, are a cloak to be *dis-mantled*), Nietzsche refuses to believe “that truth remains truth when the veils are withdrawn,” recommending that we “respect...the bashfulness with which nature has hidden behind *riddles* and iridescent uncertainties,” a respect that, not coincidentally, includes believing in “forms, tones, *words*, in the whole Olympus of appearance.”¹²³

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I must thank David Johnson, not only for his lectures on Descartes from the fall of 2010, which have influenced my relation to Cartesian philosophy, but also for his suggestions, critiques, and general guidance throughout the various stages of this manuscript. To cite every instance of gratitude due in the argument above would lengthen it greatly, so I give a general thanks here.

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¹ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume II*, trans. John Cottingham et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 270. In accordance with recent standards, hereafter I will include the volume and page number of this series of translations of Descartes’ works. Though many works are published in a single volume, I will treat each title within a given volume as a distinct work for the sake of clarity in citations. I use the following abbreviations: *Rules*, *Discourse*, *Principles*, *Passions*, and *Meditations*.

² Janet Broughton, *Descartes’s Method of Doubt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 4-5. The method of doubt, Broughton argues, “has no strategic role to play unless there is an incompatibility between very well entrenched beliefs of ours and other claims that somehow emerge as absolutely certain” (52). The method of doubt, she says, “is supposed to produce a lasting change in the limited set of our fundamental beliefs” (7), radically correcting that incompatibility. The *Meditations* are not my primary focus, but as the occasion arises I will point out the necessity of deduction even in doubt.

³ René Descartes, *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume I*, trans. John Cottingham et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 17. I note in passing the difficulty with the ‘innateness’ of the method: That which is innate is to be intuited, but intuition is already

the first step of the method (more on which in subsequent pages). In other words, intuition cannot be properly conducted without a method (“[w]e need a method if we are to investigate the truth of things” [Rules I:15]), but the method itself must be intuited. Hence, the method must remain in reserve, unactivated, without a method to the method—except by chance, which is exactly the way in which Descartes claims to have “happened” upon it in the *Discourse on the Method*: “I consider myself very fortunate to have happened upon certain paths...” (I:112). Necessarily by chance, even though “it is far better never to contemplate investigating the truth about any matter than to do so without a method” (Rules I:16). As my focus here will be primarily on deduction rather than intuition, however, this is a question for another occasion.

⁴ Ibid., 53-54.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 17.

⁷ Ibid., 51.

⁸ Ibid., 54. In *The Order of Things*, of course, Descartes “remained as close as possible to what constituted Classical thought” (247). But, certainly, we see ourselves in the scientific order, even if Foucault marks another discontinuity at the beginning of the nineteenth century that inaugurates the modern age. Moreover, “the organization of signs” after Descartes, which will concern me throughout this paper, has continued, Foucault says, “perhaps right up to our own day” (58). Indeed, Foucault seems to have readjusted Descartes’ ‘Classical’ position by the time of the 1981-82 lectures on *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, where he claims that “the history of truth enters its modern period” at the “Cartesian moment,” that is, “when it is assumed that what gives access to truth... is knowledge... and knowledge alone.” In other words, truth becomes intuitable and deducible without, which is Foucault’s point there, “spirituality.” Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador 2001), 17.

⁹ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 55.

¹⁰ E.g., Descartes, *Discourse*, I:142.

¹¹ In Cottingham’s summary, “a complex fusion of...the philosophical doctrines of Aristotle and...the demands of Christian theology.” John Cottingham, *A Descartes Dictionary* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Reference, 1993), 153.

¹² René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume III, The Correspondence*, trans. John Cottingham et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 393 n.1. Admittedly, this particular dispute did not involve Descartes himself but his disciple, Henri de Roy (Henricus Regius), whom Descartes would ultimately be forced to renounce (cf. *Comments on a certain Broadsheet* and the preface to *Principles* [I:189]), but, nevertheless, the accusations are against “the new philosophy,” i.e. the Cartesian system itself and not any individual adherent.

¹³ John Cottingham, *Descartes* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 5.

¹⁴ Ibid., 6.

¹⁵ Descartes, *Principles*, I:195.

¹⁶ Descartes, *Meditations*, 8.

¹⁷ Descartes, *Rules*, I:53.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, I:54.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, I:55.

²⁰ Descartes seems to follow Aristotle here, inasmuch as Aristotle defines “a riddle” as “describ[ing] a fact in an impossible combination of words,” which, he adds parenthetically, “cannot be done with the real names for things.” That is to say, the proper name de-riddles language. Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *The Rhetoric and the Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. Ingram Bywater (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc, 1984), 1458a25-30.

²¹ Descartes, *Correspondence*, III:187.

²² Descartes, *Rules*, I:54.

²³ Descartes, *Discourse*, I:123.

²⁴ Descartes, *Principles*, I:220.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, in *Sophocles I*, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, trans. David Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 29 (line 440).

²⁸ “Wisdom, the myth seems to whisper to us,...is an unnatural abomination.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 48.

²⁹ Descartes, *Rules*, I:54.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, I:14.

³¹ *Ibid.*, I:15.

³² “Archimedes used to demand just one firm and immoveable point in order to shift the entire earth; so I too can hope for great things if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable.” Descartes, *Meditations*, II:16.

³³ Descartes, *Rules*, 15.

³⁴ Cottingham, *A Descartes Dictionary*, 46.

³⁵ Murray Miles, “Descartes’s Method,” in *A Companion to Descartes*, ed. Janet Broughton and John Carriero (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 150.

³⁶ Descartes, *Rules*, I:25.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, I:12.

³⁸ Descartes, *Principles*, I:220.

³⁹ Descartes, *Rules*, I:26.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, I:15.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, I:25 (my italics).

⁴² *Ibid.*, I:38.

⁴³ Descartes, *Principles*, I:207 (my emphasis). Indeed fickle, memory can be too effective as well: “*The second cause of error is that we cannot forget our preconceived opinions*” (*Ibid.*, I:219-220, my emphasis).

⁴⁴ And, of course, not only plural propositions, but present attention on a *single* proposition is always compromised as well, insofar as the very condition of reflexivity is the presence of the self to itself, that is, a division that entails the deferral of the attention described by Descartes, thereby complicating the otherwise ‘simple’ process of intuition. So, while my focus is on deduction, even the more ‘basic’ operation of intuition is, finally, equally problematic.

⁴⁵ Descartes, *Rules*, I:38.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Descartes, *Rules*, I:37-38 (my emphasis). This necessary instantaneity helps us understand what is perhaps the central metaphor of Cartesian philosophy: “light signifies knowledge” (*Early Writings* I:5), reason most often used synonymously with the “natural light” (e.g. *Principles* I:199). Light, in turn, is conceived as travelling “instantaneously across the immense distances of the heavens” in the *Discourse* (I:133), resonating strongly with the instantaneity required in Cartesian deduction. Problematically, however, we also must not be *too swift*, which makes us prone to err: “Frequently those who attempt to deduce something too swiftly and from remote initial premises do not go over the entire chain of intermediate conclusions very carefully, but pass over many of the steps without due consideration” (*Rules* I:25).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, I:25.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, I:32.

⁵⁰ Descartes, *Discourse*, I:121 (my italics).

⁵¹ Descartes, *Rules*, I:43.

⁵² Ibid., I:67. Of course, there is nothing to guarantee that one will not write down a *false* memory, but this can be granted, if only to play by Descartes' own rules in order to show that, ultimately, the game itself is untenable. Also worthy of note, despite their numerous affinities, what Descartes celebrates in writing is precisely what Plato condemned some 2000 years before in the *Phaedrus*. While Descartes commends "that happy invention" (ibid.) and its usefulness for memory, Plato claims it will only "create forgetfulness in the souls of those who learn it." Plato, *Phaedrus*, in *Selected Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, revised by Hayden Pelliccia (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 275a.

⁵³ Descartes, *Rules*, I:66-67.

⁵⁴ Ibid., I:67 (my italics).

⁵⁵ Ibid. (my italics).

⁵⁶ Jean-Pierre S ris, "Language and Machine in the Philosophy of Descartes," in *Essays on the Philosophy and Science of Ren  Descartes*, ed. Stephen Voss (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 188. S ris' comments are from his discussion of the "universal language" that Descartes describes in a letter to Mersenne on November 20, 1629 (*Correspondence* III:13). The comments, however, are pertinent here because this universal language, in fact, is coterminous with fully economized words, though the demonstration of the connection would require a lengthy digression.

⁵⁷ Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 213.

⁵⁸ S ris, "Language and Machine," 188.

⁵⁹ Foucault, *Order of Things*, 59.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 58.

⁶¹ Ibid., 56. While I trace Descartes' demand for the transparency of language with respect to its potentially distracting effect on deduction, Foucault reaches this modification of the "archaic level" (54) of knowledge with different emphases. If truth is founded in "the confident judgements [sic.] we are able to make by means of intuition" (56), then it begins with a reflection on innate ideas. If knowledge is to begin with the simplest and most certain, it cannot begin elsewhere. As a result, "history and science will become separated from one another," since "the perusal of written works" can be nothing more than an exterior "interplay of their authors' opinions" (55), which is not a methodical beginning and therefore cannot initiate knowledge. These opinions "may well, in some cases, possess an indicative value," but, finally, "erudition" (55) does is not intuition. Therefore, "the written word ceases to be included among the signs and forms of truth," which it can, at best, "translate" (56). Where signs were previously "one of the figurations of the world," they are now mere—but necessary—"tools" (58).

⁶² Descartes, *Meditations*, II: 92.

⁶³ Cf. Descartes, *Rules* I:15, 26, and 33.

⁶⁴ Descartes, *Meditations*, I: 110.

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- ⁶⁵ Broughton, *Descartes's Method of Doubt*, 24.
- ⁶⁶ René Descartes, *The Search for Truth*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume II*, trans. John Cottingham et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), II:415-16 (my emphasis).
- ⁶⁷ Descartes, *Correspondence*, III:187.
- ⁶⁸ Descartes, *The World*, I:81.
- ⁶⁹ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 61-62.
- ⁷⁰ Descartes, *Correspondence*, III:366.
- ⁷¹ John Cottingham, *Cartesian Reflections* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 108.
- ⁷² Descartes, *Correspondence*, III:307.
- ⁷³ Descartes, *Meditations*, II:54.
- ⁷⁴ Descartes, *Correspondence*, III:307.
- ⁷⁵ Séris, "Language and Machine," 181.
- ⁷⁶ Descartes, *Correspondence*, III:303.
- ⁷⁷ Descartes, *Discourse*, I:129.
- ⁷⁸ Descartes, *Early Writings*, I:5.
- ⁷⁹ Descartes, *Meditations*, I:43.
- ⁸⁰ Descartes, *Correspondence*, III:366.
- ⁸¹ Descartes, *The World*, I:82.
- ⁸² Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 51.
- ⁸³ *Ibid.*, I:81. Curiously, I point out in passing that if words only signify by convention, and they are the model for natural sensation, then nature, to carry the analogy further, also signs by a certain convention.
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, I:82.
- ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁶ Descartes, *The World*, I:82.
- ⁸⁷ Descartes, *Meditations*, II:18.

⁸⁸ Ibid., II:11. Cf. also *Principles*, articles 11-12.

⁸⁹ Broughton, *Descartes's Method of Doubt*, 6.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 16. As Broughton points out, the idea that “our knowledge begins in our senses, when the *species*, or forms, that are in sensible things also lodge in our souls,” is a scholastic “assumption” that Descartes wants “wants [the meditator] to drop” (26).

⁹¹ Descartes, *Principles*, I:195. See also Broughton, *Descartes's Method of Doubt*, chapter 7 (esp. 139-143), for more on “the relation... between the narrow and broad conceptions of thinking” (140) in the *Meditations*. If Descartes “very often telescopes” (141) the discoveries of the *Meditations* in other writings, then the *Meditations* (particularly the Second) is indeed the best place to investigate this relation.

⁹² Not to say, of course, that Descartes is the first to do so; Plato, for instance, basically defines philosophy as “the separation of the soul from the body” in the *Phaedo*. Plato, *Phaedo*, in *Five Dialogues*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, revised by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 64c.

⁹³ For example (though there exist others): *The World*, I:81; *Meditations*, II:57; *Optics*, I:164-166; *Principles*, I:216; and *Passions*, I:333-334.

⁹⁴ Descartes, *Early Writings*, I:4.

⁹⁵ Descartes, *Rules*, I:57. For a more detailed account of comparison in deduction, see Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 53-54.

⁹⁶ Descartes, *Correspondence*, III:122.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Sérís, “Language and Machine,” 185.

⁹⁹ Descartes, *The World*, I:81 (my italics). While “[l]earning a language is not reducible to acquiring a lexicon” (Sérís 185), since it requires both “the meaning of the words *and* the grammar” (Descartes, *Correspondence*, III:10, my italics), this is not entirely applicable here, since *words* are at issue rather than *language* as such—Descartes’ use of signs in deduction is “economizing with *words*,” not with language in its entirety.

¹⁰⁰ Descartes, *Principles*, I:224.

¹⁰¹ Descartes, *Optics*, I:164.

¹⁰² For instance, in addition to *The World*, *Principles*, I:284; *Optics*, I:165; and *Passions of the Soul*, I:344-345, 348.

¹⁰³ Descartes, *Principles*, I:184.

¹⁰⁴ Perhaps the presumption of materiality can be accounted for by Miles' understanding of deduction, that is, as something understood implicitly in intuition and later made explicit (see above). But this would be difficult to maintain since Descartes, of course, holds that "the soul by which I am what I am... is *entirely* distinct from the body" (*Discourse* I:127, my italics). We cannot intuit materiality. To argue otherwise would be to devalue, in Barry Stroud's words, the "challenge to human knowledge that had never even been recognized... in philosophy up to that time," namely, "the 'problem of the external world.'" Barry Stroud, "Our Debt to Descartes," in *A Companion to Descartes*, 514.

¹⁰⁵ Descartes, *Rules*, I:37.

¹⁰⁶ Descartes, *Principles*, I:207 (my italics).

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, I:220.

¹⁰⁸ Descartes, *Meditations*, II:48.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 166.

¹¹¹ Descartes, *Optics*, I:165.

¹¹² Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 145.

¹¹³ Descartes, *Principles*, I:187.

¹¹⁴ Descartes, *Discourse*, I:122-24.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Commenting on the maxim in a letter to Renieri for Pollot (1638), Descartes writes that "[n]othing exterior... is in our power except in so far as it is at the command of our soul" (*Correspondence* III:98), but, of course, signs, even if an accurate expression of thought, are not entirely within our control; any mark, as Derrida will say in "Signature Event Context," is always iterable, repeatable beyond the will of s/he who originates it: "What would a mark be... whose origin could not be lost on the way?" Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Margins*, 321.

¹¹⁸ Descartes, *Correspondence*, III:257.

¹¹⁹ Descartes, *Discourse*, I:124.

¹²⁰ The *Phaedrus* is again relevant: "To tell what sort of thing the soul *is* would require an absolutely superhuman and lengthy narrative" (246a); i.e., the immaterial soul cannot be articulated in human language.

¹²¹ Descartes, *Correspondence*, III:366.

¹²² Descartes, *Early Writings*, I:3. And “every word,” Nietzsche confirms, is “also a mask.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), section 209.

¹²³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 38 (my italics).