CARTESIAN WISDOM

How René Descartes Tripped over God’s Daughter

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This tale about wisdom and reformation
is dedicated
to those who suffered
from the events of 9/11
And its aftermath
And as this aftermath unfolds
May we approach it wisely
With our emotions under our reason
And our reason a servant of our will

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PREFACE

In 1982 it occurred to me that all of the writings of Rene Descartes - from the first page of his first notebook, *Cogitationes Privatae* (‘Private thoughts’) to the last paragraph of his last published article, *On the Passions* - were ambiguous between opposite readings. Not only does Descartes offer two complete philosophic systems of the universe of human knowledge and belief, but in fact, on almost every issue, the one contradicts the other, and in most of the remaining cases, the one plays down as trivial what the other emphasizes as crucial, and in the odd remaining case, he offers as ‘clear and distinct’ in one view what he dismisses as incoherent in the other. The works of Leibniz, briefly discussed here, have a similar structure offering two contradictory interpretations.

I realized immediately that I could not take these ambiguities too seriously. *Cartesian Wisdom* aims to prove that Descartes’ philosophy, like Wagner’s music, is not as bad as it sounds. The main goal of this study is to skirt all problems dealing with wisdom in order to make them clear and distinct. I hope to do this by presenting certain knowledge about wisdom as discussed in the *Apocrypha*. Each sentence in this paragraph contains an ambiguity of the assorted types we will discuss. Find them now! Reread!

If true, this systematic ambiguity in all of Descartes’ writings has some implications here and there for philosophy, for the study of machine, human, and animal intelligence, for the history of science, and for cognitive psychology. Presumably scholars will have to retune their assumptions about mind and body, already overworked professors will have to rewrite curriculum plans, and perhaps encyclopedia entries will have to be retouched. But these bagatelles pall in significance compared the major revision in the linguistic perspective on Descartes. Linguists and rhetoricians, attention! You must now recognize that Descartes was not simply a good writer, but in fact one of the greatest geniuses of the Wisdom writing style that ever lived.

*Cartesian Wisdom* shows that in linguistics (syntax, morphology, semantics, phonology…) and rhetoric (how to make our ideas clear and to organize our thoughts), Descartes stands as a giant, perhaps towering over his two main predecessors in Wisdom writing: Plato and St. Augustine. *Wisdom writing*, in a nutshell, offers a ‘secular’ and ‘non-religious’ interpretation of ancient ideas about ‘thinking’ in terms of – what today would be called – cognitive psychology. Wisdom ‘psychology’ aims to explicate four virtues: {wisdom, temperance, justice, courage}. Ancient writings in the wisdom tradition, offering *Wisdom philosophy*, tend to be more subjective (figurative) than objective (literal) but they all attempt to offer a version of ancient psychology of mental events, and especially, of the creative use of human language. Descartes brought wisdom writing to its pinnacle by structuring, not simply one book or article, but his entire life’s work to explicate one word: *Wisdom*. *Cartesian Wisdom* offers a soup-to-nuts dictionary and encyclopedia entry for this *Wisdom* championed by St. Augustine and Descartes. The *Wisdom writing style* (or *rhetoric*), often called *Gnostic* or *Apocryphal*, requires the writers to offer highly stylized ‘autobiographies’ or ‘confessions’ in the 1st person (I) and sets of ‘rules’ to regulate your conduct in the 2nd person (you). The best of the best, such
as Descartes, offer complete grammars of all forms and usage of personal pronouns in their native language(s) and in what today is called ‘universal grammar’.

To familiarize you with the genre, I have written large sections of Cartesian Wisdom in the general wisdom style (mainly those passages involving my parents). Other passages I wrote in the style of St. Augustine (the hair-raising harangues aimed at you – Yes, you, you slouch! You who stalled in your self-development so long ago that the grass has grown so high you can no longer see, let along follow, the path. Which path? The uphill path right in front of you that waits there for you and you alone! Learn to hope again! Do not plan to make plans! Plan action! Let my spark kindle your tiny fire to light your way. Up! Now! Start! Once awakened by my tiny flare, your inner eye may strengthen to look up and, lo, see the stars! Awaken!). Still other passages I wrote in the style of Descartes (all laid out logically to please even the most hermetic anal-retentive with rhetorical semaphores strategically placed to focus your attention). St. Augustine, one of the best orators who ever lived, loved the exclamation point and interjections: Yea, Lo, Verily, and so on. Descartes, a geometer, preferred declarative sentences and adverbs, like: hence, therefore, thus, and then… I offer a linguistic and rhetorical analysis of the personalities involved in wisdom study and examine how they minded their p’s and q’s, as in: If p, then q, since they were also logically inclined.

After you finish this book, come back and reread this preface, and with your red pen, mark the rhetorical semaphores. Notice the 1st paragraph uses all four personal pronouns of the wisdom system. The 2nd paragraph introduces wisdom [feminine] ambiguously in a paragraph bristling with ambiguities. The 3rd discusses 3rd person things, like writings and lives. And the 4th paragraph presents the overall picture of wisdom philosophy and includes the four Platonic virtues. Does this qualify the writings as ‘sacred’ or ‘revealed’? What would Descartes have thought?

The general autobiographical style – always in the 1st person pronoun – in wisdom literature focuses less on the ‘historical truth’ (although outright lies are frowned upon) than on my subjective opinions and beliefs about the significance of events in one’s development. Always, always, always, a Wisdom autobiography, being a stylized description of a generally well-known and well-worked out set of mental exercises to attain wisdom, must end up with the author landing on his feet not his ear. Hence, not uncommonly, I come out on top in the assortment of situations I describe. Wisdom autobiographies, or ‘confessions’ generally describe ‘character forming’, or rather ‘will shaping’ events that occurred decades before they were put on paper and a decade or more after the writer has achieved some brush with wisdom – however fleeting the encounter. I first saw the ambiguity in Descartes in 1982 and realized the significance of the personal pronouns. It took until 1991 until I became fluently acquainted with wisdom’s pronoun usages.

Since Descartes felt that the main practical use of wisdom philosophy – the ancient study of mental phenomena usually expressed in terms of the grammar of personal pronouns – was to develop ‘good mental health’, or something like that, I open Cartesian Wisdom with a discussion of a typical horrendous health problem faced by
someone whose health insurance kept him alive and kicking long after the cells of his body gave out. The squeamish should not abandon wisdom since we soon move from the thoughts offered by a dying man to his son in his final days on to such briskly paced topics as the burning at the stake of Vanini in 1619 for blasphemy, probably the crime Descartes would have been accused of if he had not encoded his wisdom philosophy. Remember that shortly after his death, it became a crime punishable by death to buy, sell, own, read, or teach any books of Descartes. And in Holland, the most liberal country of Europe, it was forbidden to discuss any aspect of Descartes ideas either positively or negatively at any university. Obviously this latter ‘negative’ was to prevent anyone from simply presenting the Cartesian philosophy in Toto under the pretext of then trying to show it was wrong.

Forgive me for pointing out the obvious! Needless to say, of course, Descartes’ main key word, WISDOM, is nowhere to be found in any significant form in any work about or translation of Descartes. Wisdom is not a main heading of any sort in the text and never made the index in the excellent Intellectual Biography of Descartes by Gaukroger. Wisdom plays no key role in the superb translation of the Writings of Descartes in three Volumes by Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch, and Kenny. Remarkably, in the Correspondence of Descartes, Vol. III, presumably by definition written in the 2nd person pronoun, wisdom never made the index. Insofar as wisdom made the text in any Cartesian studies, it figures only into ‘dreams’ and perhaps a ‘nervous breakdown.’ Sometimes one can find the references to wisdom in Descartes by looking under melon in the index, and in the more careful studies Italian melon. The best single reference for ancient wisdom studies I have found is Augustine of Hippo by Peter Brown, which has solid sections on the different species of ancient wisdom and the particular variety endorsed by Plato and St. Augustine.

Almost all English dictionaries, under wisdom, skip Platonic wisdom and offer Ben Franklin’s definition of prudence. In the entry for wisdom in the twenty volume Oxford English Dictionary, Descartes’ meaning of wisdom is offered about half way down. If God’s foolishness is man’s wisdom, and man’s wisdom is God’s foolishness, as the Bible asserts, then one might expect that the wise are seldom prudent and the prudent seldom wise. Who cares what this sentence means? The crucial thing is that it makes sense, and this implies that prudence and wisdom are not synonymous and hence require different dictionary entries. In this study, we often do not care about what anyone says or means, we are much more concerned with how they say it. In rhetoric, it ain’t what you say, it’s the way that you say it.

Along with wisdom, the key word of all Descartes goals and ambitions, a raft of related words, such as virtues and vices, and under them specifies such as courage, temperance, justice, and a host of even more words play little – usually no – role in any exposition of Descartes methods, thinking, or results. Cartesian Wisdom aims to resuscitate the key terms of Platonic Wisdom Philosophy in which Descartes made his main contributions. Cartesian Wisdom may here and there introduce you to something new, but in general, this study only causes you to think more clearly about what you already know, and gives you words to aid your thinking about your thinking.
Presumably in the Olde West an American Indian trading with the U.S. Cavalry at Fort Apache just after some ‘incident’ - perhaps the ‘Geronimo Problem’ - had been quelled selected his words carefully. Descartes (1595-1650) was born a few decades after Martin Luther - according to the Encyclopedia Britannica an Augustinian Monk ‘bible scholar and linguist’ – had sparked the ‘Luther problem’. Descartes, a champion of the anorexially narrowest interpretation of St. Augustine – far narrower than Luther’s chubby presentation - during the years when the works of St. Augustine were banned by the church (1642), judiciously edited his words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and essays – carefully larding his Wisdom message into his projects and proposals. Descartes probably agreed totally with Luther on the status of the Apocrypha. St. Augustine, obviously, is hardly mentioned by name, but his linguistics style, taste for the Apocrypha, and rhetorical organization pop off of every page of Descartes.

Most modern English speakers, like you, have no familiarity with Wisdom Literature. Yes, you. You who stumble in the dark, candle at the ready, wanting and needing – without knowing or even suspecting it – a flame, a sputtering flame, even a tiny spark! Here! Here find the spark! Light your light. And see! No longer just look, but see! [Note: This is the highly stylized wisdom sort of writing and speaking. Possibly this is the way the Delphi Oracle made pronouncements.] The Pilgrim Fathers of Harvard University guaranteed you and me cannot have any ‘wisdom’ by banning publication of almost all Wisdom Literature in English in 1629. Along with the Pilgrim’s prohibition on certain ‘banned books of the Bible’ (the Apocrypha) there percolated throughout English scholarship a ‘purging’ of all of the words required to understand Rene Descartes on his figurative interpretation. For instance, Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom and sort-of ‘patron Saint of Ancient Athens’ has no entry in the twenty volume Oxford English Dictionary, although many lesser deities have solid entries. Wisdom has no entry in the Oxford Classical Dictionary, which cannot be owing to the ethereal nature of Wisdom, because Logos and the Holy Ghost have entries relating them to ‘earthly matters’. Most incredibly, Wisdom is not an entry and is not mentioned in the index of the Oxford Companion to the MIND, probably the single most comprehensive book in the world on modern studies of mental phenomena, tracing all ideas back for centuries through various cultures. I merely note these omissions as facts and leave Orwell’s disciples to explain their absence. Noam Chomsky calls this Orwell’s Problem: How can we know and understand so little given the vast amount of data and information that bombards us?

So alright already! what did Descartes do to raise the hackles of everyone? Boy, Oh Boy, what he tried to do! Or rather, I should say: Girl, Oh Girl, what he tried to do! Man alive! Pardon the slip: Woman alive!

When one major trend of human development (like the ancient world) clashes with another (like the modern scientific world) you can expect to find a linguist standing right there at this crotch of history sweatily trying to jibe old words with the new jargon into a dictionary. At precisely the juncture in the 1600’s when the assorted and sundry manuscripts and books of the bible were being edited, rejected, modified, and translated from ancient Latin, Greek, and Hebrew into modern languages in order to be made
available and palatable to the general public (Luther’s bible, W’s bible, the Catholic Bible, the King James Bible…), there erectly stood Descartes rigid in his linguistic and rhetorical opinions about the precise status of what was meant by ‘revealed text’, ‘inspired’, and ‘scriptural’. Descartes, following St. Augustine in *The Interior Master*, based his understanding of these terms on an analysis of the (universal) grammar of the appropriate usage of 1st (I), 2nd (you), and 3rd (he, she, it) personal pronouns. Descartes pricked the sensibilities of those who wanted to decide ‘sacred’, ‘revealed’ and so on essentially on political grounds. Descartes wanted to make all distinctions based on Platonic Wisdom philosophy, particularly as espoused by St. Augustine. A simple example will illustrate the basic problem, and give a hint as to why the personal pronouns, particularly he versus she, played such a role. To focus your attention, always remember, the study of Wisdom is the study of the appropriate use of personal pronouns, such as: I, you, he, she, it, je, tu, vous, ich, Du, Sie, and so on. Wisdom study can be, and usually is, more than just the study of pronoun usage, but it need not be. For Descartes, it was only pronoun usage.

The books of the bible known to St. Augustine (400 AD) break into three groups. The *Old Testament*, the books of the Jews, discuss, but do not offer, a savior. The *New Testament* argues that God sent his Child, a Son, Jesus Christ, to earth to save mankind. The *Apocrypha*, similar in many ways to the *New Testament*, differs in one fundamental: God sent his child, a *daughter* called Wisdom, to earth to save mankind. Linguistically, we examine why if Son gets a capital, why should or shouldn’t d/D-aughter? Undaunted and fearless in my resolve, I take head on the battalions of bible translators, editors, and lexicographers who died within the last four hundred years.

The Catholics always accepted the *Apocrypha* as ‘sacred’, ‘revealed’, and ‘divine text’ – usually ignoring the prefaces of St. Jerome - and in 1546 at the Council of Trent decided that the *Apocrypha* was the Word of God. The English Church, especially the Pilgrims, said that the *Apocrypha* was ‘false doctrine’ and not ‘sacred’. Others joined the fray. Bullets flew. Heads rolled. Descartes ducked under cover, stating in his earliest known writings, the diary-notebook *Cogitationes Privatae*: ‘So far, I have been a spectator in this theatre which is the world, but I am now about to mount the stage, and I come forward masked.’ Gaukroger, in his thorough intellectual biography of Descartes mentions an incident when Descartes gave Princess Elizabeth, one of his favorite correspondents, a wrong date for his mother’s death. Gaukroger tells us: ‘…If we discount ignorance or carelessness, as I think we have to, then we must seriously consider that he is deliberately misleading his correspondent. But why would he want to do this? Descartes was intensively secretive, taking as his motto: *bene vixit, bene qui latuit* – ‘he lives well who is well hidden’ – but to hide information about himself by providing a false data for his mother’s death would seem unduly duplicitous even for Descartes.’ (Gaukorger: 16)

If the *Apocrypha* is ‘unsacred’ (the Protestant position), or simply pushed under the rug (which seems to be the Catholic position since 1600) then one can have a ‘literal’ interpretation of the bible as a history of the life of God’s Son on earth. The things one
might think of (or translate) as figurative expressions, idioms, or metaphors become ‘miracles’.

On a literal interpretation accepting both the New Testament and the Apocrypha, God’s Child would be a Transvestite, Cross-Dresser, or Trans-Sexual. This was deemed unacceptable from a theological and marketing perspective. If the Apocrypha is ‘sacred’ and a current topic of discussion, then one can only have a ‘figurative’ interpretation of the bible as a sort of ‘mental overview’ or as an ‘ancient subjective, not objective, psychology of thinking’. In the figurative interpretation, God’s Child is not a Person, but is in fact a component of a human mind. A not uncommon view in the ancient world, by 1600, this ‘figurative Saviour’ was abhorrent to all, with one notable exception. This is the alternative developed by Descartes, following St. Augustine, in elaborate detail. Wisdom is a component of the human mental apparatus, the component we would today call ‘creativity’ or following Chomsky, the ‘performance component’ of language use. This is the focus of St. Augustine’s The Interior Master and all of Descartes’ works.

The Apocrypha, widely known in the 1600s by everyone – for instance it is discussed in the English classic Pilgrim’s Progress – had God’s Daughter sent to earth to save humanity. Today, as Orwell would have predicted, the Pilgrims have successful ousted Wisdom, not only from our consciousness, but from the dictionaries, encyclopedias, collected works, and translations of the genius of the age, Rene Descartes.

It is difficult to believe that any human being could have a theory that could be simplified by presenting it in the arcane formalisms unleashed upon linguistics by Noam Chomsky. To some extent, I agree. But in the special case of Descartes, and his predecessor St. Augustine, the overall perspective of universal grammar offered by Noam Chomsky in fact renders their works comprehensible since they wrote in a religious tone full of personifications and Chomsky’s grammar is quite secular using only relatively normal grammatical terms and rather simple aspects of algorithmic recursive function theory implemented in non-procedural logic based languages running on massively parallel computers with a shared memory space. Fret not, dear reader! We avoid technical details and focus on the blood and guts of Descartes’ theory, always steering our attention towards the philosophical road-kill where the Cartesian rubber meets the road to the hangman, the road trod by Vanini in 1619, the year of Descartes’ remarkable discovery.

Let me close with one of the prayers from the Wisdom of Solomon, the work of the Apocrypha cited by Rene Descartes in his ‘Dedication’ to the Meditations. To offer quotations from the Apocrypha to the Doctors of the Sorbonne was vaguely equivalent to wearing a Martin Luther T-shirt with a slogan from St. Augustine printed on it. Anyway, here is a typical prayer from the Apocrypha, the main work in the Wisdom literature:

9Oh God of my fathers and Lord of mercy,
who hast made all things by thy word,

2and by thy wisdom hast formed man…

With thee is wisdom, who knows thy works
and was present when thou didst
make the world,
and who understands what is pleasing in thy sight
and what is right according to thy commandments.

10 Send her forth from the holy heavens,
and from the throne of thy glory send her,
that she may be with me and toil,
and that I may learn what is pleasing to thee.

11 For she knows and understands all things,
and she will guide me wisely in my actions,
and guard me in my glory.

17 Who hast learned thy counsel,
unless thou has given wisdom
and sent thy holy Spirit from on high?

18 And thus the paths of those on earth were set right,
and men were taught what pleases thee,
and were saved by wisdom.

Wisdom protected the first-formed father of the world,
when he alone had been created;
she delivered him from his transgression,
and gave him strength to rule all things.

'Greek, She

Note carefully the use of pronouns, in particular the use of she. Also, in the footnote, there is a mention that the Greek form for Wisdom is [feminine], she. This leads us to…. Actually, this leads us to start the tale of Descartes. All wisdom writing starts with an autobiographical journey larded with analogies and symbolism. So I step back in time to visit my parents on a sweaty dog-day in 1963, join me!

But first, a short note on how this book came to be. On 9/11, as the day has come to be known, I watched thousands die in the World Trade Center disaster out of my living room window while sitting in an easy chair drinking Chamomile tea to calm my nerves. See Appendix I for an essay I wrote at midnight on 9/11 and sent to my friends, many of whom knew that I lived a short distance from ground zero. Through this experience I began to grasp the sense of tragedy that pervades the works of St. Augustine, who lived through the sack of Rome and the Vandal invasion of the Mediterranean, to mention two horrors. I understood Descartes’ comments reflecting on the Battle of White Mountain.

A few months later in December, one of my dearest and closest friends, Maurice Gross, a computational linguist from Paris, died rather suddenly and unexpectedly giving me not merely a loss, but ripping a hole in some part of my mind. In the next few short months, several of my colleagues and former professors from my graduate studies died, and I felt that I had lost some of the pivot points about which my developing intellectual life had turned. As heaviness of the leaden Spring eroded away and the early dawns of June promised a brighter light, two close friends from my undergraduate days, who I have not seen in thirty years, died in a car accident. These heavy loses in minds that often
rubbed against mine provoked me to meditate on ‘!’ and write about her. I wrote this book during June and July after thinking obsessing a lot about it, driven by fitful states of urgency.

The target audience is not computational linguists, philosophers, or professional anythings. Rather, I wrote thinking of the shaken heterogeneous lot of people who responded to my 9/11 essay, ‘What a Way to Go!’ Most of the comments came from people who were reaching out, but towards what they did not know. I could see they were all reaching in the same direction, but the direction was not towards anything comprehensible to them. Any sense of direction came mainly from growth within themselves, each in their own way, each stretching the same way in the same direction for the same reasons in response to the same event, as their inner germ developed. Here I describe the sense of the inner sense of direction sensed by my respondents sensing my use of the 4th person pronoun in my essay.

Such human strivings to cope, and perhaps to grasp, are not governed by any ‘attraction’ towards any external, they are driven by a compulsion towards specific mental growth, like a seedling (will) bursting thought its protective cover (reason), sending out shoots seeking wisdom. The seedling (will) hidden in a seed case (reason) and covered with dirt bursts out, expecting and hoping for, but not drawn by, any light. The human mind is not steered by any external sun or North Start; the human mind orients itself using internal gyroscopes seen by wisdom’s eye. Many people wondered about my style of writing and the sources of such prose. This book describes the wells from which I drink and shows the more daring among you how to access them. Linguistically speaking, my respondents were stretching their pronoun systems towards the 4th person pronoun of universal grammar. This growth of the human will, expressed in terms of personal pronouns - perhaps probably almost for certain the secret Gnostic message of the Pythagoreans - was described in elaborate detail by Rene Descartes in the 17th century. Descartes, a master rhetorician, did not wear his heart on his sleeve.

Except for the events of 9/11 and my correspondents, I would never have written this study of the battle between will and reason. I see no reason to write about such things, and basically, am in total agreement with Plato’s Seventh Letter, which for wisdom writers is a fervent, almost rabid, call to inaction and contemplation.

I have burst-wise worked on Cartesian Wisdom intensely during June and July in fits and starts. In to a ridiculous accident several years ago I damaged both my retinae, and for reasons I do not know, I sometimes lose the ability to see things close, although I always have 20/20 vision for distances over ten feet. That is, I often cannot read the books and articles I so love, and worse from your point of view, very often cannot read the text I write. An aneurysm burst in my left eye on the Fourth of July, basically eliminating any possibility of my reading anything for a week, and causing me to retreat to darkness - but this gave me more time to type. You get the idea. Eventually, armed with giant illuminated magnifying glasses, I will comb out errors and redundancies. Here and there, some references are incomplete, but rest assured, when school begins I shall have my students pour over all the text.
I would like to thank xyz Humanities Council....