

***THOUGHT AND KNOWLEDGE*, by Norman Malcolm, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977, 218 pp.**

Norman Malcolm's new book consists of nine lucid and provocative essays, of the sort which readers of his earlier volume *Knowledge and Certainty* are likely to expect. The essays have all previously appeared (although some of them are revised here), but their republication in one volume results in a unified treatment of three important topics: Descartes, Mind and Behavior, and Knowledge. Accordingly, I shall discuss the book in terms of these headings.

I. Descartes

The historically-oriented essays of Malcolm exhibit a painstaking effort to look behind the scenes, in order to lay bare an often inexplicit line of argument which might have led a philosopher to make some puzzling claim. Such an approach is avowedly conjectural, but it can be fruitful just the same. It can lead, for example, to a discovery that certain passages are significant in a way not previously appreciated. And, kept within proper bounds, the approach can produce interesting new interpretations of texts.

Malcolm begins his study of Descartes by remarking that the *sum res cogitans* doctrine seems to lack the cogency of the *cogito*. He then suggests that Descartes' *sum res cogitans* doctrine can be ac-

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counted for by the following underlying principle:

G. x is my essence if it is the case that (a) if I am aware of x then (necessarily) I am aware that I exist, and (b) if I am aware that I exist then (necessarily) I am aware of x (32)

Principle G, Malcolm argues, is to be regarded as embodying two tests; furthermore, whereas 'thinking' passes these tests, 'my body' fails to pass. Thus we appear to have an explanation of Descartes' view that his essence is thinking.

It is important to see just how 'thinking' satisfies principle G. In the case of test (b), since awareness that I exist is (for Descartes) an instance of thinking, and since (for Descartes) we are aware of all our thoughts,¹ it follows that if I am aware that I exist then I am aware of thinking. What about test (a)? It can never yield a negative result, because I can never observe that I am not aware that I exist; Like the sentence 'I do not exist', the sentence 'I am not aware that I exist' is self-defeating; it can never be used to report a genuine observation.

Nonetheless, Malcolm argues that this result does not vindicate test (a). Rather, since '(a) cannot serve to eliminate *any* candidates... it is not a genuine test. It is not really a method for helping to determine my essence' (32). Furthermore, test (b) turns out to be spurious as well, because although 'thinking' passes it, 'The particular value *myself* is irrelevant to the truth of the conditional. "If I am aware of breathing then I am aware of thinking" is necessarily true. "If I am aware of an old tire then I am aware of thinking" is necessarily true. And so on' (35).

Malcolm does not explain exactly how he arrived at principle G, except to say that attributing it to Descartes helps clarify certain passages which are otherwise somewhat opaque. But, contrary to what principle G appears to say, there is no reason to suppose that my essence, or indeed anything's essence, comes from *awareness* of essence. To be sure, Descartes' view is that my essence consists in awareness (thinking), but this point ought to emerge when 'thinking' is substituted for ' x ' in principle G; not in the condition 'I am aware of ' x '. The following version seems to have the same explanatory power, while at the same time avoiding this criticism:

G'. x -ing is my essence if it is the case that (a) if I am x -ing then (necessarily) I exist and (b) if I exist then (necessarily) I am x -ing.

Suppose now that 'think' is substituted for x . Thus, condition (a)

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becomes the *cogito*, and Descartes' transition from *cogito ergo sum* to *sum res cogitans* becomes all the easier to fathom. This result can be further reinforced by the observation (suggested by Malcolm) that condition (b) (still substituting 'think' for *x*) can benefit from one important defense of the *cogito*: as with 'I do not exist', the utterance of the sentence 'I am not thinking' is self-defeating.²

But what exactly is meant by 'thinking'? In his essay 'Thoughtless Brutes', Malcolm proposes that Descartes' 'claim that his essential nature is thinking is actually the claim that his essential nature consists in *thinking of propositions*' (53). In addition, Malcolm suggests, Descartes believed that a sensation *consists of* a propositional content plus a propositional attitude; in fact, 'for Descartes the distinction between the "mental" and the "physical" is *defined* by the presence or absence of propositional content' (47). And since animals do not entertain propositions, they do not have sensations.

Although Malcolm's interpretation does provide a route to the Cartesian view that animals do not experience sensation, it is hardly unproblematic. Besides being 'an absurdly overintellectualized view of the life of man' (49), collapsing the distinction between sensation and thought, it seems contradicted by the *Sixth Meditation*, where Descartes speaks of the intimate connection between mind and body, and adds: 'For if that were not the case, when my body is hurt, I, who am merely a thinking thing, should not feel pain, for I should perceive this wound by the understanding only...'³ And in speaking of the 'first grade of sense perception' (sensory stimulation) and the 'second grade of sense perception' (sense-experience), Descartes remarks that 'in them no falsity can reside'.⁴ Plausibly this is because neither one of them need involve a propositional element. (Of course, *saying* that one is having a sensation, or *identifying* one's sensation would involve a propositional element, but that is a different matter.)

This argument must of course be weighed against the evidence cited by Malcolm in support of his contention that Descartes regarded all thinking as propositional. The main evidence is a passage from the *Third Meditation*:

Of my thoughts some are, so to speak, images of the things, and to these alone is the title 'idea' properly applied; examples are my thought of a man or of a chimera, of heaven, of an angle, or [even] of God. But other thoughts possess other forms as well. For example in willing, fearing, approving, denying, though I always perceive something as the subject of the action of my mind, yet by this action I always add something

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else to the idea which I have of that thing; and of the thoughts of this kind some are called volitions or affections, and others judgments.⁵

This passage is preliminary to Descartes' cosmological argument, and it seems likely that in this context he is not attempting to characterize *all* forms of thought; rather, his focus is on those forms of thought which will be relevant to his proof of God's existence. In particular, Descartes is concerned with ideas or thoughts which are *representative*. But there is no suggestion that sensations are thoughts *in this respect*. In fact, Descartes is not attempting to characterize all thought here; he speaks merely of 'some thoughts' and 'other thoughts'. Thus, the passage which Malcolm regards as the key to his interpretation of Descartes actually appears to leave room for a distinction between propositional 'thought' and non-propositional 'thought' (i.e., sensation). What Descartes' use of *cogitatio* and *sensus* have in common, I suggest, is not that both refer to the mind's entertaining propositions, but that neither logically presupposes the existence of body.

If I am correct, then Malcolm is wrong about why Descartes denied that animals have sensations. But perhaps Malcolm's speculations can still be applied to some forms of 'thought' other than sensation. The point would be this: Descartes held that such thought involves the formulation of propositions. Since it makes sense to speak of a creature's formulating propositions only if he can give (linguistic) expression to them (54–55), and since animals cannot give the requisite expression,⁶ it follows that we cannot attribute thoughts to animals. But Descartes is incorrect here, Malcolm argues: we could still attribute *beliefs* to animals, since one can hold a belief without formulating a corresponding proposition. Although Malcolm does not put the point in quite this way, he is making a distinction between '*A* thinks that *p*' and '*A* is thinking that *p*'. The first schema ascribes a (possibly dispositional) belief to *A* – one that can have a nonlinguistic behavioral expression. The second schema, however, attributes a reflective or occurrent thought to *A*; involving the formulation of propositions, it must be capable of linguistic expression. Thus, we reach the reasonable conclusion that animals devoid of language do not engage in discursive thinking.

Having considered some operations of mind, Malcolm turns to 'Descartes' Proof that He Is Essentially a Non-material Thing'. The following argument, it is suggested, is at least implicit in Descartes' writings:

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- (1) *I think I am breathing* entails *I exist*
- (2) *I think I am breathing* does not entail *I have a body*
- (3) Therefore, *I exist* does not entail *I have a body*

Malcolm takes the conclusion here to mean 'It is logically possible that I exist and I do not have a body', or equivalently, 'The conjunction "I exist and I do not have a body" is not a contradiction' (61). Since the argument is valid, its rejection will have to be based on the discovery of a mistaken premise. The argument's second premise is the focus of Malcolm's attack.

Malcolm's strategy is to convert that premise into a third-person sentence, and to argue that the third-person sentence exhibits 'an odd sort of conflict' (77), which transfers back to the first-person version as well. To make this point precise, Malcolm asks us to consider the following sentence:

(2*) He has no body and he thinks he is breathing.

The argument now is this: 'The first conjunct threatens the intelligibility of the second one. Our ordinary understanding of how to operate with sentences of the form "He thinks that p" is frustrated when we are invited to apply them to bodiless beings. It would seem that the conflict between the two conjuncts prevents the total conjunction from having sense' (67). And the trouble in (2*), Malcolm thinks, carries over to (2).

Several remarks are called for here. In the first place, Malcolm's conclusion seems to involve a tacit appeal to some version of the Verifiability Principle. This is a familiar strain in some of Malcolm's other writings as well, and I shall not pursue criticisms of it now. Second, as Malcolm notes (64), shifting from the first-person to the third-person is not quite in the spirit of Cartesian meditative inquiry; but in addition, it seems at odds with his own criticism of behaviorism (cf. section II below). His justification for the procedure involves a principle that 'whenever anyone makes a meaningful statement about himself in the first-person, there is a corresponding third-person statement which could be made by someone else, and which would be true if the first-person statement is true and false if it is false' (65). Unfortunately, however, Malcolm's principle is false. Consider a sentence *S* which (it so happens) will never be uttered by anyone else. The first-person statement 'I am the only person who will ever utter *S*', though true, does not have a true third-person counterpart.

Suppose, though, that we waive this objection for a moment. Is it true that (2*) is somehow unintelligible? Malcolm admits (69-73)

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that thoughts can in some instances be attributed to disembodied spiritis (cf. certain religious claims), but, drawing on some remarks of Wittgenstein, he argues that such uses of language involve a 'secondary' use of concepts. We can speak of a disembodied spirit's thinking just as we can pretend that a doll is in pain, but 'this employment of psychological concepts is *dependent* on an application of those concepts that is based on the human figure and countenance, and on the expressive behavior of living, bodily, human beings. The primary use of the psychological concepts could exist without the secondary one, but not vice versa' (73).

Malcolm does not indicate precisely how *this* point is to be employed against Descartes. Presumably his argument would be the following:

- (i) According to Descartes, it is logically possible that I should understand sentences such as 'He is thinking' even if no bodies existed.
- (ii) Thus, according to Descartes, it is logically possible that I should understand sentences such as 'He is thinking' even though I never had the concept of body.
- (iii) But (ii) is tantamount to holding that one can employ a concept in the 'secondary' sense even if one is unable to employ it in the 'primary' sense. Since one cannot do this, and since (ii) is entailed by (i), it follows that the Cartesian thesis mentioned in (i) must be false.

Now, even if the distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' concepts is granted, this argument is unsatisfactory. For in fact (ii) does not follow from (i) at all. In order to derive (ii) from (i), it would have to be assumed that one could only have the concept of body if bodies actually existed. But such an assumption is plainly false. (Cf: 'One could only have the concept of spirit if spirits actually existed.')

Still, Descartes' view that he is essentially non-material must face Wittgenstein's private language argument (75–76) – an argument that has received so much attention that it cannot profitably be considered here.

II. Mind and Behavior

Written under the influence of Wittgenstein, Malcolm's essays are characteristically preoccupied with the connection between mental states and behavior. Such is the topic of 'Behaviorism as a Philosophy of Psychology', where Malcolm finds something to object to and

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something to agree with in the behaviorist's (specifically, B.F. Skinner's) analysis of mind.

The objection to behaviorism lies in its treatment of first-person psychological sentences. Behaviorists have assumed that such sentences have the same 'content' or 'verification' as their third-person counterparts, and this has led them to the false conclusion that first-person psychological claims are made *on the basis of* observation. It would be absurd in most instances, Malcolm argues, to make a statement like 'I see that my hands are shaking, so I must be excited'.

Certainly Malcolm is correct in holding that many first-person psychological reports are not normally based on observation (although there is perhaps some trouble surrounding the notion of a 'normal' psychological report). But it is not so obvious that this claim can be sustained for reports of cognitive states (vs. sensation reports). For example, a man might learn that he does not believe what his wife has told him, by noticing that he has gone to great lengths to verify her claims. Suppose, however, that Malcolm is right, and that first-person psychological reports are never ('normally') made on the basis of observation. This point would be fatal to behaviorism only if it were assumed that one's knowledge of one's own behavior is based on observation. Now, Malcolm does quote passages from Skinner which suggest a commitment to that assumption. But that commitment seems nowise necessary. Behaviorists could hold both that first-person psychological sentences refer to behavior (or dispositions) *and* that one has non-observational knowledge of one's own behavior (or dispositions). Such a view carries the consequence that one's own psychological reports are subject to *tests* — a point to which we shall return shortly.

The kernel of truth in behaviorism, Malcolm thinks, is contained in its recognition that the use of psychological language is 'logically connected' with public behavior. This does not mean, however, that psychological sentences are mere abbreviations for sentences about behavior. In the first place, one cannot speak of behavior *simpliciter*; behavior must be viewed in a social context (cf. 137–140). Second, even if context is taken into account, we cannot 'produce an entailment by conjoining some outstanding feature with *all* of the relevant circumstances. There is no "all" here. Our language does not contain closed rules of that sort' (140). Finally, Malcolm denies that (Wittgenstein held that) every sensation report has a nonverbal behavioral counterpart.

Someone who has satisfied us that he understands certain psychological terms begins to use them in first-person statements

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in the absence of the primitive, preverbal behavior that had previously served as the basis for judging that he understood those terms... The interesting point is that in a great many cases we will *accept* his testimony... We begin to use his testimony as a new criterion of what he is feeling and thinking, over and above and even in conflict with the earlier nonverbal criteria. (101)

As the term 'criterion' perhaps suggests, Malcolm means that first-person psychological reports generally are privileged; they are not subject to verification.

Of course, many philosophers in a skeptical vein have asked why testimony should be accorded with special status. They would feel better about the matter if psychological reports were *testable*. And perhaps such reports will someday become testable, if (1) they refer to bodily processes, and (2) a 'cerebroscope' is developed which allows us to monitor the relevant bodily processes.

Malcolm argues that the line of thought just sketched is fundamentally in error. First, it presupposes that mental states 'must consist in something' ('Wittgenstein on the Nature of Mind', 145; cf. 152–156). And second, it presupposes that psychological reports call for some sort of explanation; however, according to Wittgenstein 'philosophy should try neither to *identify* nor to *explain* the phenomena of mind... It should *describe language*' (157).

As a general outlook, this therapy is in danger of *ad hoc* employment. It threatens arbitrarily to forbid the very questions which to philosophers for centuries have seemed to cry out for an answer. But at first sight at least, Malcolm's use of Wittgenstein's idea appears to be coupled with subsidiary arguments. A case study is provided by the essay 'The Myth of Cognitive Processes and Structures'. There Malcolm considers Noam Chomsky's problem of how a speaker can master a language, given that one's linguistic training consists in being exposed to only a tiny fraction of the sentences of one's language. Chomsky's suggestion is that speakers somehow internalize a system of rules which are capable of generating the sentences of a language. Malcolm is highly critical of this proposal, however, claiming that it rests on an assumption 'that in speaking a person must be *guided*' (164). He develops this point into a dilemma; I shall number the horns and discuss them separately.

If the presence of a structure or system is supposed to explain these abilities and performances, then we need to ask, [1] *How* does the person know how to employ the system? Does he

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have another system that shows him how to use this one? [2] Or does he *just know* how to use it? But if this latter is a rational possibility, then it is also a rational possibility that there is *no* structure or system that accounts for language mastery, or for any repertoire of skills, abilities, or performances. The presence of a guidance system cannot be a general requirement for knowledge. (168)

Concerning [1], the crucial issue revolves around the sort of explanation that is being proposed. Malcolm appears to assume the following principle: Structure *S* explains *A*'s ability to ϕ only if when ϕ -ing *A* consults *S* as a model. But surely there are important senses of 'explain' to which this principle does not apply. We could say that someone had mastered the rules of chess if his play were always in conformity with the rules, and if he rightly designated certain attempted moves (e.g., the pawns going sidewise) as impermissible – even though he did not *consult* the rules of chess, and even though he had never actually articulated them. Nonetheless, supposing him to have mastered the rules would explain why he made some moves and refrained from making others; it would also predict an array of future moves. I see no reason why a person's mastery of a grammar could not be something like this.

Concerning [2], Malcolm's point seems to be that it is *logically possible* that language mastery has no explanation. I do not know that Chomsky would disagree. But even granting this logical possibility, why should we suppose that language mastery *in fact* has no explanation? Perhaps something that Malcolm says in another context can be applied here:

This is a natural human power. It is an *Urphänomen*. It is not clear what 'explaining' it could *mean*. Explanations come to an end somewhere, and where should they terminate if not in something as primitive as this? (156)

The claim that our philosophizing must terminate somewhere is incontrovertible. What is not so obvious, however, is that Malcolm's essay on Chomsky successfully locates the proper terminus of inquiry (either philosophical or scientific; cf. 157–158).

III. Knowledge

Although much recent work in epistemology has concentrated on 'the analysis of knowledge', this concern is conspicuously absent from Malcolm's book. The reason appears to be the following: at-

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tempts to provide an analysis of knowledge, construed as efforts to extract the meaning of sentences like '*A* knows that *p*', overlook the large variety of uses to which the prefix 'I know' is actually put. Part of Malcolm's purpose is to canvas those uses. Another purpose is to try to understand why some philosophers have made knowledge claims which Malcolm believes are somehow improper. I shall focus on the latter.

What is the function of the phrase 'I know'? In his essay 'The Privacy of Experience', Malcolm suggests that it can perform the following functions: it can inform one's audience that one has grounds for some assertion; it can inform an audience that one is an authority; and it can indicate that one is making some claim from a privileged position. If these points are granted, Malcolm thinks, an argument can be derived against the commonly held philosophical view that people have (in corrigible) *knowledge* of their own sensations. Consider the sentence 'I know that I am in pain'. Here, Malcolm argues, the prefix 'I know' cannot serve any of the purposes just outlined. It cannot indicate that the speaker has *grounds*, for the only possible grounds could be the very thing he claims to know – namely, that he is in pain. Nor can it be used to indicate that the speaker is an authority, for authority must be susceptible to validation, and 'since we do not know what it means for a person who understands English to *believe mistakenly* that he has pain, the notion of a person's proving an authority on this question is meaningless' (126). Finally, the prefix 'I know' cannot show here that the speaker is in a *privileged position*, for even the privileged are capable of error, and 'This is what we do not understand in the case of one's own pain' (126). In the light of all this, the expression 'I know', applied to sensation, is adjudged 'logically meaningless' (128).

Malcolm is surely correct in his feeling that 'I know I am in pain' is 'a rather queer thing to say' (125). Furthermore, he seems to be correct in claiming that in this sentence the prefix 'I know' performs no useful function. To reach this conclusion, however, I should like to suggest a route different from the one taken by Malcolm. The first step is to introduce the assumption that one's own pains are necessarily unpleasant – i.e., that they are sensations that one dislikes. Now, it cannot be the case that *x* is disliked by *A* and *A* does not know that *x* exists. So, if *x* is *A*'s pain, *A* must know that *x* exists; this is announced by his declaration 'I am in pain'. Therefore, since first-person pain reports already have epistemic import, there is no point in prefixing them by the phrase 'I know that'. But, *pace*

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Malcolm, it does not follow that one cannot know himself to be in pain; redundancy is not tantamount to meaninglessness.

Turning from sensation reports to claims about material objects, we encounter another area where Malcolm believes the phrase 'I know' to have been misused. His concern in the essay 'Moore and Wittgenstein on the Sense of "I know"' is with Moorean sentences such as 'I know with certainty that that's a tree' or 'I know I am a human being'. Malcolm states that when Moore said these things to him, he 'felt a mental paralysis' and 'could not get hold of the meaning' (185). The basic issue is this: on Malcolm's view, sentences such as these cannot be meaningfully uttered in just *any* circumstances; they make sense only against a background of (ordinary) doubt or disagreement (172–173). In contrast, Moore held that the ordinary meaning of a sentence is independent of the circumstances under which it is uttered (173–174).

Although Malcolm believes himself to have shown that there is no such thing as 'the ordinary sense' of 'I know' (180–185), he takes great pains to understand Moore's contrary position. What, Malcolm asks, did Moore believe to be the ordinary sense of 'I know'? The answer he proposes is that Moore tended to regard knowing as a *state of mind* – 'as a state of which that person can have "direct knowledge" or "immediate awareness"' (188). Thus,

When Moore responds to the skeptic his attention is not focused outwardly on evidence, but inwardly on his own mental state. He *seems* to take the skeptic about knowledge to be challenging Moore's declaration as to what Moore's own mental state is. And Moore feels called upon to respond with a careful, introspective discrimination. (191)

This is, I think, an illuminating interpretation of Moore. It helps explain why Moore felt as secure in knowledge claims about physical objects as some philosophers have felt in claims about their own psychological states. It also helps explain why Moore believed that the meaning of such sentences as 'I know that's a tree' is invariant with respect to assertion-conditions: 'The sense of the utterance would be this – that the speaker has (or is in) a certain mental state' (192). Finally, although Malcolm does not bring out the point, his interpretation helps explain why Moore uses the following expressions interchangeably: 'I know that', 'I know for certain that' 'I feel certain that' (cf. the concluding paragraph of Moore's essay 'Four Forms of Skepticism').

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There is a further line of thought (implicit) in Moore's writings to which Malcolm also draws attention. This is the idea, also suggested by Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*,

that for each of us there are some propositions (different ones for you than for me) that are contingent and quasi-empirical, and yet have the following two features: First, they are 'beyond doubt' in the sense that if one doubted them one would not be sure of anything, including one's understanding of one's own language..., and consequently one's ability to reason, to judge, to investigate, and *even to doubt*, would be crippled -- to put it paradoxically, some doubts would make doubting impossible! Second, there would be nothing *unreasonable* in one's refusing to doubt these 'framework' propositions, even in the face of the most astonishing happenings. (195)

In addition, these 'framework' propositions cannot, *contra* Moore, be said to be *known*, for they are not subject to doubt; rather, they are themselves presupposed by any doubt.

The long history of epistemological quests for certainty provides testimony to the appeal of this position. But, extended, the view has a surprising consequence: religious beliefs, assuming them to be part of a person's 'framework', can neither be challenged nor held to be unreasonable. This consequence is accepted and defended by Malcolm, in opposition to 'Western academic philosophy', where 'religious belief is commonly regarded as unreasonable and is viewed with condescension or even contempt' ('The Groundlessness of Belief', 204). According to Malcolm, religious beliefs constitute a system of thought which is in one sense like scientific thought: both are ultimately *just accepted* by their adherents.

This account does have the merit of explaining why some fervent religious believers will not countenance challenges to their systems -- why they will not *recognize* anything as an argument against their views. It appears, however, that Malcolm's 'defense' of religious belief could be marshalled equally well on behalf of paranoid delusions and racial prejudices, as follows: we would dismiss such beliefs as unreasonable and/or false, but only because we have decided to treat the 'framework' propositions of paranoids and racists as hypotheses to be tested *within* our system of verification. And although we might succeed in converting those people to our picture of the world, we could not show that their beliefs are actually in error.

I suspect that Malcolm would not regard this point as a *reductio ad absurdum* of his position. Presumably, the task of philosophy is

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to describe language-games or systems of belief, not to evaluate them. But here, of course, an extremely fundamental philosophical issue emerges. It is testimony to the importance of Malcolm's work that his discussions ultimately bring us to questions concerning the nature of philosophical inquiry.⁷

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NOTES

- ¹ The textual evidence for this claim is not univocal, however. See E.M. Curley, *Descartes Against the Skeptics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), esp. pp. 171–184.
- ² My claim here, of course, is not that G' is defensible, but rather that it may be helpful for Cartesian exegesis.
- ³ *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, ed. and trans. E. Haldane and G. Ross, I, 192.
- ⁴ HR II, 252.
- ⁵ HR I, 159.
- ⁶ Cf. the *Discourse*, HR I, 115–117.
- ⁷ I found the following typographical errors in *Thought and Knowledge*: 34 (line 4); 47 (line 25); 48 (line 28); 65 (line 1 and line 11); 69 (line 8); 77 (line 4); 95 (line 10); 165 (line 3 of blocked quotation); 200 (line 21); 206 (line 19).