WITTGENSTEIN'S EVIL DEMON

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Wittgenstein has invented a new form of skepticism. Personally I am inclined to regard it as the most radical and original skeptical problem that philosophy has seen to date. . . . Wittgenstein’s main problem is that it appears he has shown all language, all concept formation, to be impossible, indeed unintelligible. (Kripke, Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language, p. 60)

In The Breakdown of Cartesian Metaphysics and his earlier, seminal The Downfall of Cartesianism, Watson sets the tone for many contemporary discussions of Descartes.¹ For example, it is de rigeur for almost any work on philosophy of mind to begin by attacking Descartes’s theory of the mental. The emphasis is often on Cartesian dualism, and the impossibility of solving the interaction problem if there are two kinds of entities.² How do we secure mind’s place in nature with such a scheme? Watson helps set the parameters of these discussions by emphasizing the immateriality of mental stuff; he sees the introduction of dualism and the characterization of the mental as primarily religiously motivated.³ We think the attacks on Descartes misplace the emphasis. Descartes was a dualist, we have argued elsewhere, because he sees that mental properties are radically different in kind from physical ones.⁴ What is crucial is not the notion of some immaterial stuff, but that of a property that is radically different in its logical behavior from other properties that we generally classify as physical, namely an intentional one.⁵ That this simple point has been so often missed is evidenced by the fact that Descartes’s modern detractors, almost

¹ In this discussion we have made use of the later book only.
² See Fodor, pp. 114ff.
³ See Alan Hausman, ‘Watson’s The Breakdown of Cartesian Metaphysics’.
⁴ Hausman and Hausman, Chapter 2.
⁵ We use the term in a technical sense discussed in our book, pp. 19–21. For a full explication see Bergmann’s ‘Acts’ and ‘Intentionality’.
to a person, engage the problem of the nature of this very property.  

A second Cartesian discussion—not, as we shall show, unrelated to the first—has been given renewed interest by Kripke’s work on Wittgenstein. In his *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* Kripke argues that Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations* presents a new form of skepticism which goes beyond anything presented before him, including Hume and, for our purposes, Descartes’s ‘evil demon argument.’ This is a startling claim. Popkin, for example, in a series of papers and books has argued that Descartes and Hume exhaust the skeptical territory.  

If Kripke is correct, Popkin is wrong—although, as we shall argue, the dimensions of Cartesian skepticism are wider than Kripke envisions.

In *Descartes’s Legacy*, we expressed the belief that the study of the history of the theory of ideas, through the lens of Descartes’s theory of intentionality, could shed light on contemporary problems in the philosophy of mind. Such illumination often goes in both directions. Contemporary functionalist theory of mind enabled us to structure Descartes’s problems in what we believed to be a new way. In this essay, we will illustrate in detail how such two-way illumination works. By examining the relationship between the extreme Cartesian skepticism of the evil demon hypothesis and Wittgenstein’s argument in the *Philosophical Investigations* about rules and private language, we hope to bring clarity to both views.

Kripke, as seen in the quotation above, does not hesitate to label Wittgenstein’s argument skeptical, though he knows Wittgenstein himself might not have agreed. Indeed, we accept as basically correct Kripke’s brilliant analysis of what has come to be called the rule following argument in the *Investigations*.  

This is the alleged new form of skepticism. However, we believe Kripke is not quite correct when he credits Wittgenstein with a form of skepticism not heretofore seen. This point is not merely of historical interest. We argue in this paper that one reasonable construal of Descartes’s evil demon hypothesis

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6 See Kim pp. 101–02, Fodor, and Searle. Fodor, in all his recent works, has been chasing after an explanation of the intentional, and Searle makes this quest a centerpiece.

7 See Popkin, *The High Road to Pyrrhonism*, p. 11, and *History*, pp. 17ff. Popkin discusses the extreme skepticism of the demon in which everything can be doubted, but as we argue, Descartes did not see ‘everything’ as including the very meaning of our thoughts. Popkin’s skeptical debates have to do with believing falsehoods.

8 By this we do *not* mean that we endorse the conclusions of the rule following argument. But as we say at the end of this essay, we don’t know how to refute them, either.