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Mental fictionalism and the dangers of Cartesian *apologia*

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ABSTRACT

Toon (2023) argues that “the mind is a useful fiction.” The mind, for Toon, is essentially an “inner world” or “inner grotto,” which is “private” and which “houses our mental states – our beliefs, desires, hopes, fears, and the rest.” His position, according to which the metaphor of mind is a “story that we cannot avoid telling” risks elevating the concept of mind to that of a “sacrosanct given.” Work in philosophy, history, and anthropology shows that talk of the states we count as “mental” is far older and far more widespread than the concept of mind or the category *mental* – the metaphor of mind therefore does not appear to be inevitable. A strand of anti-Cartesian philosophy argues that not only is the concept of mind avoidable, but also that it should be avoided – that it encourages a vision of human beings which is deeply impoverished and confused. This paper offers a genealogy of the concept of mind and category *mental*, building on work by Rorty and Wilkes, buttressed by recent work in history and anthropology. It then reconstructs some of the arguments that the concept is harmful, rather than useful, for our understanding of ourselves and the world.

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1. Is the mind a useful fiction?

Toon (2023) argues that the mind, along with mental states and mental representations, is a “useful fiction” (ch.1; ch.2). The mind, for Toon, is essentially an “inner world” or “inner grotto,” which is “private” and which “houses our mental states – our beliefs, desires, hopes, fears, and the rest” (p.1) Toon agrees with Ryle that the core feature of the mind, at least on the “traditional picture,” “is not that it takes the mind to be non-physical, but that it takes it to be a kind of hidden mechanism – a set of unseen ‘wires and pulleys’ directing us from behind the scenes, locked away in a ‘secret grotto’” (p.2).

For Ryle, this is a “complaint” (Toon, 2023, p. 2). For Toon, this is a key part of what makes the notion of mind so useful. Similar to

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Hampshire and Ryle (1950), Toon claims that rather than a “philosopher’s myth,” “[the] notion of the mind as an inner world . . . is a metaphor (or, rather, a set of metaphors) that lie at the heart of our ordinary talk about the mind” (*ibid.*) This metaphor, and the associated story about the make-up and workings of human beings, is “crucial to our ordinary talk of people and their mental states. Indeed, it is a story that we cannot avoid telling” (*ibid.*, p.3).

Toon claims that his “aim is not to answer the historical question of when these metaphors became part of our concept of mind” (2023, p. 3). He diverges from Hampshire in declining to take a stand on whether “these metaphors are primitive or natural” and whether “they would be familiar to the Greeks or Romans.” I believe that this significantly weakens his argument, and obscures significant problems with his core position (*ibid.*).¹

For Toon, ordinary talk about the states we count as “mental” essentially depends on this metaphor of an inner world in which they are housed. Melser (2004, p. 157), who also treats mental state terms as metaphorical, claims that “[s]ince before Plato it has been believed that thinking goes on in people’s heads” – but a cursory look at the history of how human beings have been conceptualized shows that this is not true. Talk of beliefs, desires, pains, emotions, and the many other diverse states that the category “mental” comprises is much older than the idea of an inner space which houses them all: “mental” states are much older than the mind, and indeed, talk of such states is much older than their being grouped together as “mental.” They are also much more cross-culturally stable: talk of beliefs and desires is attested in almost every human language, but very few languages have a perfect synonym for “mind” or for the category “mental,” or the notion of an inner space that houses these states. This seriously undercuts the claim that the story of mind-as-inner-world is a “story that we cannot avoid telling.” The apparent inevitability of describing people in using the language of such states provides no support to the inevitability of the metaphor of the mind.

For Toon the concept of mind is only a metaphor, but one so useful as to be an in-some-sense inevitable part of how we humans understand ourselves and one another. In endorsing talk of the mind, whether taken literally or not, Toon’s position is a “Cartesian” one in comparison with a distinct anti-Cartesian strand in the history of philosophy. There is a tradition in philosophy perhaps inaugurated by Ryle (1949), extended by Rorty (1979, 1982),² developed in detail by Wilkes (1988, 1992a, 1992b, 1993a, 1993b), and most recently defended by Gough (2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022c, 2022d, 2023a, 2023b, 2024a), according to which the concept of mind should be abandoned. Melser (2004) defends an interesting position that overlaps with both this anti-Cartesian strand and fictionalism, sharing with Toon (2023) the claim that ordinary mental state talk is metaphorical, while

advocating the abandonment of these metaphors. The first step toward this position is to show that “our term ‘mind’ is not a sacrosanct given” (Wilkes, 1993a, p. 204; see also Lillard, 1997; Wierzbicka, 2006).

Toon’s claim that the concept of mind is inevitable, even if just as a metaphor, is in direct opposition to this strain of anti-Cartesian thought. Indeed, from this opposing perspective, it is a form of Cartesian *apologia*. Descartes, according to Toon, got his metaphysics wrong, but did a good job explicating the essential and inevitable metaphor that we “cannot avoid” using for describing and explaining human behavior. As Toon puts it,

The absurdity that Ryle so brilliantly teases out of Cartesianism is not a sign that Descartes has got his philosophical map wrong—or, at least, not entirely wrong. The folk *do* talk about mental states as if they were inner states. The absurdity results from taking such talk too literally. (2023, p.26)

Toon thus elevates the Cartesian way of thinking above criticism – at least so long as it is not taken too literally. Descartes, according to Toon, was wrong about the actual make-up of human beings, but no matter – we were wrong even to think that the truth or falsity of his view was relevant to whether we should retain it in our thinking about human beings.

Conversely, if we accept that the concept is not inevitable, and accept Toon’s arguments that the concept’s use must be understood as metaphorical, we can ask ourselves whether it really is a *useful* metaphor. There are, I think, strong reasons to believe that it is not. History and a scope broadened beyond the anglophone world shows us that we had no problem talking about the states we now count as “mental” without using this metaphor. Additionally, aspects of the metaphor prove deeply harmful – to people’s self-conception, to their understanding of the psychiatrically ill and disabled, to expert and non-expert views of psychology, psychiatry, and cognitive science, and to humans’ understanding of their relationship to animals and place in nature. As such, I agree with Toon that there is no such thing as a mind, but here argue in favor of that more strongly anti-Cartesian strand of philosophy that claims that it is a bad idea to talk as if there were such a thing.

Of course, a great deal of Toon’s (2023) argument is devoted to showing that talk of particular mental states, and especially their apparent commitment to representations, is best understood as an ineliminable metaphor for understanding human beings and their behavior. His position regarding particular mental states and of representational language is not directly touched by these anti-Cartesian arguments against his partial defense of the concept of mind itself. However, his position regarding the concept of mind itself is used to motivate and defend his position regarding particular mental states. Additionally, the concept *mind* and the category *mental* are used in setting the scope of mental fictionalism (although cf. Toon, 2023,

pp. 3–5). The fictionalist position thus risks being “Cartesian” in a second way – roughly the same way as the behaviorism of Watson, who “explicitly accepted the mental/physical dichotomy, inasmuch as he junked everything on one side of it” (Wilkes, 1992a, p. 26).

2. When, where, and why the mind?

2.1. Mental states without mind or mental

While Ryle, Rorty, and Wilkes alike place the blame for the concept of mind squarely at the feet of Descartes, I share Toon and Hampshire’s suspicions of overstating the influence of philosophy and philosophers. It is more than a little unlikely that Descartes articulated the concept of mind in a time and place where no-one else already shared or was otherwise inclined toward the concept and was somehow so widely read and so persuasive that almost everyone in Western Europe acquired the notion over the span of a few hundred years. Even so, he is among the first to *articulate* the concept, and hence can probably be used to give an approximate date to its arrival, give or take the possibility of his good foresight about the way the conceptual winds were blowing, and the possibility that philosophers may need a little time to articulate newly developing concepts.

I will follow Wilkes in beginning with two pre-Cartesian views of human beings, neither of which involves the concept of mind – the view of human beings in the Iliad, and the view of human beings in Aristotle. The Homeric and the Aristotelian view of human beings grants them emotions, pains, decision-making, rumination, motivational conflict, desires, urges, thought, the senses, and the rest of our repertoire of “mental” states and capacities (Russo, 2012; Wilkes, 1993a). Neither, however, houses them all in a single inner space. This is important: talk of mental states appears to predate the concept of mind by several millennia, and as such, talk of mental states is clearly possible without a concept of mind, metaphorical not.

Wilkes, following broadly in the tradition of Snell (1953), claims that in the Iliad’s picture of human beings, a human is “an aggregate, both physical and psychological” (1992a, p. 200). Actions in this picture tend to be initiated by the parts of a human being

the *thumos* (approximately: “spirit”), *kradie*, *etor*, *ker* (all three approximately: heart), *phrenes* (approximately: “lungs”, “midriff”, or “liver”, generally credited with emotion-laden thoughts), *noos* (approximately: “intuition”, or “insight”). *Thumos* is sometimes an organ, sometimes rather a “spirited thought”-one can have more than one *thumos*. What is more, hands and feet can have a say in the matter as well: “And my *thumos* in my chest is zealous to fight . . . and my feet below and my hands above are eager”. (Wilkes, 1992a, pp. 200–201)

The work of “mind” is divided between several concepts: there is the mysterious passive “psyche” that survives death, but has no apparent psychological or agentive roles, the motivating “thumos,” the emotional “phrenes,” and the intellectual “noos.” None is well-translated as “mind.” Without the mind, and a corresponding mind-body dichotomy, there was no notion for body either, only for corpse and skin:

the picture of man-as-aggregate was not restricted to the psychological domain, but extended also to the physical. Just as there was no term that translates readily as “mind” in ancient Greek, so there was no term for “body” in the sense of “living human body”: *soma* means “corpse” while *chros* or *sarx* are “skin”. (*ibid.* p.201)

This picture was found not only in writing, but in art. Humans were assemblages in this conceptualization, and were even drawn as such

[N]ot surprisingly, the early Greek art of Mycenae and its period shows man as an assembly of strangely articulated limbs, the joints underdrawn, and the torso almost separated from the hips. It is graphically what we find again and again in Homer, who speaks of hands, lower arms, upper arms, feet, calves and thighs as being fleet, sinewy, in speedy motion, etc., with no mention of the body as a whole. (Jaynes 1976, 71, as quoted in Wilkes, 1992a, pp. 201–202)

Homeric Greek enabled one to pick out whole people (using names and pronouns), their parts, and every aspect of their psychology without a concept of mind, and without an inner space that houses “mental” states. It does not, however, lack for expressive power or sophistication.

Wilkes believes that philosophy and the science of human beings requires a “rival” concept to mind, one that is able to replace it in its characterization of the subject-matter of psychology (folk and scientific) and hence our understanding of ourselves (1992a, p. 204). She does not believe that the Iliad furnishes us with such a notion. The picture is too loose and unsystematic, and its notion of *psyche* is “always unclear and sometimes marginal” (*ibid.*).

For such a concept, she looks to Aristotle’s development of the *psyche*. It is continuous with the Homeric concept not only in being picked out by the same term, but also by continue to refer to “that which distinguishes living and active, from non-living or inactive, things” (1992a, p. 205). In Aristotle, a *psyche* is a kind of form.

For Aristotle, the [*psyche*] was the form of an organism. The form of any and every X tells us “what it is to be” an X; thus the form of a statue is primarily its shape, the form of a dog is primarily a description of its characteristic activity, that of a corkscrew is primarily its function; that of a threshold is primarily its location, of a road its direction, and of breakfast, its timing. (*ibid.* p.210)

The *psyche* of a human being includes all the capacities that a human being possess that living, but not non-living, things characteristically possess:

digestion, reproduction, movement, growth, desire, perception, imagination, thought, and reason.

The category is “unified” not in claiming that these capacities are homogeneous, nor in positing some inner space in which they may all occur, but instead in claiming that they form a richly structured whole. For Wilkes’s Aristotle, “the capacities that constitute the [*psyche*] interlock and help determine the nature of each other; they are not disjointed, like beads on a string” (1992b, p. 110). “Lower” capacities are shared by all living things, while “higher” capacities are increasingly scarcely distributed. Higher and lower capacities may both subserve one another, an “essential feedback” – on the one hand, “if a dog does not eat, it will not be fit to run;” on the other “the greyhound races to catch the hare that it sees, so that it may eat” (Wilkes, 1992b, p. 111). Lower capacities make the exercise of higher capacities possible, while the higher functions “loop back on the healthy regulation of lower ones” (*ibid*). According to Wilkes, “the more complex the organism, the more intricate the interlocking of its varied and numerous faculties” (*ibid*).

Wilkes argues that the Aristotelian picture of the *psyche* and of human beings is implicit in contemporary scientific psychology. She argues for this conclusion on the basis of several points of convergence between scientific psychology’s view of its subject-matter and Aristotle’s *psyche*: the kind of structured unity Aristotle endorses for the life and psychological sciences, for the capacities that make up the *psyche*, and for the animal kingdom as a whole; the construal of awareness as the tip of the iceberg of a huge body of activity that constitutes the *psyche*; its freedom from a clean distinction between the mental and the physical (see also her 1988); its emphasis on development; its focus on capacities, functions, and types of behavior over “immediate introspection of the *contents* of the mind,” “itemized building-blocks” supposed to be the foundation of our knowledge (*ibid*, 119); and several more (Wilkes, 1992b; cf. Gough, 2023a, 2024a).

The views of humanity in Homer and Aristotle undercut the claim that the metaphor of mind, an inner space that houses our mental states, is an inevitable or essential part of talking about mental states. Both allow for rich psychological discussion of human beings, and the attribution of “mental” states to human beings. Neither draws on the metaphor of mind as an inner space that houses mental states, and neither even has a category “mental” that includes all and only mental states – Homer has no systematizing category at this level of abstraction, and Aristotle subsumes “mental” states into a much broader category that includes digestion and movement.

2.2. Interiority

One might have two objections to the argument thus far. The first objection is that a work of fiction and a philosophical treatise are not a solid basis for making such claims: perhaps Homer excised the notion of mind for artistic reasons, and perhaps Aristotle did the same for philosophical reasons, while in their cultural context the notion of mind was widespread.

Cross-cultural work helps to answer this first objection (as it will the second). *Mind* does not translate well to or from many contemporary languages. Wilkes (1993a, p. 204) notes that “Croats fluent in English disagree about whether *duh*, or *um*—two words with very different meanings in Croatia – better translate ‘mind’, so it again looks as though *our* term is dispensable.” Wierzbicka (2006) argues at length that the concept of *mind* is not a cross-cultural universal. For example, in the Illongot people of the Philippines, the notion closest to *mind* includes “fertility, health, life energy, social relations, vitality, and animation” alongside typically “mental” capacities (Lillard, 1997, p. 270).

The second objection is that Homer and Aristotle are committed to an inner-outer distinction, and therefore to some notion of interiority, and therefore to *mind* as Toon defines it. Homer, after all, attributes psychological states to *parts* of the person, many of which are *internal* to the person. Talking about activity “within” Aristotle’s *psyche* perhaps commits us to some form of interiority.

The best place to start for this second objection is with the work of Slingerland (2019), because it is ostensibly so friendly to Toon’s position, and based on a variety of sources including archeological evidence and a huge amount of corpus data. Slingerland argues against the “myth” of strong mind-body holism in early China. He argues that early China had an inner-outer distinction, making use of a “container metaphor,” which he argues is a cross-cultural and cross-linguistic universal.

Even granting this, Slingerland’s argument does not get us to the claim that the notion of an inner space that contains all mental states is a cross-cultural universal, and hence does not get us to the claim that the concept of mind is a cross-cultural universal. Slingerland locates the boundary associated with the container metaphors he finds in early China at the boundaries of the organism, claiming that it is parasitic on the inner-outer distinction which is essential to the existence of organisms in his view: it does not identify some further space *within* the human being, be that brain or mind. His claim is only that psychological states in early China were often seen as existing within the human being. Likewise, in Homeric Greek, there is not one inner locus for psychological states (if there is any inner locus at all), but instead a huge diversity of such loci – as many as there are parts of a human being.

These inner spaces could furthermore be nested in early China, according to Slingerland (2019) – the “heart within the heart” contains psychological states that are more private, less visible, and more important, than those that are just within the heart. This suggests that talk of the “inner” and of states being more or less “inner” is tied not to a metaphor of an inner mechanism, nor levels of “innerness” to nested inner mechanisms, but instead to levels of privacy, visibility, and importance – *contra* Toon.

Interestingly, the same is true for some of the expressions and metaphors we use to describe and understand ourselves and our behavior in English. Often, our talk of the “inner” relates to privacy, visibility, and importance rather than to the metaphor of an inner mechanism – we can, for example, talk of our “innermost” feelings. Likewise, we often locate states within parts of the body and not within the mind. We talk of things “breaking” our hearts or causing them “to sink” (Wierzbicka, 1999). We tend to talk of pains and tickles as located in parts of our bodies, not as existing in our minds (Sytsma & Reuter, 2017). We talk of “following our feet” (and occasionally other organs), of “cold feet,” of our bodies telling us to do things (or not to), as well as gut feelings and following our guts. We talk of “itchy fingers” and “itchy feet” as if our fingers or feet housed desires to do certain kinds of thing. Such talk is, indeed, plausibly cross-linguistically universal (Wierzbicka, 1999), but it is not committed to a single inner space that houses mental states, and indeed counts directly against it by explicitly countenancing a *variety* of inner spaces, many of which are directly identified with parts of the body. Not only does idiomatic and metaphorical English frequently countenance more than one inner space, it also countenances things that are “inner” but not “mental” – you can carry your past inside you, have people in your head, have places in your heart, and so on. The metaphor of mind is doubly impoverished in countenancing only one inner space, and only “mental” states as being potentially “inner.”

This is utterly at odds with Descartes’ vision of interiority, seemingly endorsed by Toon as inevitable and essential to the workings of mental state talk, and by Melser (2004) as predating Plato. In Descartes’ view, which was historically hugely novel (even if it was not novel in his immediate cultural milieu), the human mind is “a single inner space in which bodily and perceptual sensations . . . , mathematical truths, moral rules, the idea of God, moods of depression, and all the rest of what we now call ‘mental’ [are] objects of quasi-observation,” “[passing] in review before a single Inner eye” (Rorty, 1979, p. 50, as quoted in Wilkes, 1992b, p. 119).

The concept of mind therefore is not a cross-cultural universal among contemporary cultures, nor is it found in Homer or Aristotle. At some point between now and the time of Aristotle’s writing, the concept arrives in the Western philosophical tradition. I agree with

Ryle, Rorty, and Wilkes that the mid-17th century, when Descartes was writing on the topic, is a good approximate date for the arrival of the concept of mind.

One piece of evidence in favor of this conclusion is that Descartes took an Aristotelian conceptualization of human beings as his opponent in arguing for the concept of mind, for the category of “mental” states, and for the existence of a single inner space that housed them. Descartes, early in his *Discourse on the Method*, sets up an opposing picture of human beings in order to knock it down:

In the first place, then, I considered myself as having a face, arms, and all that system of bones and flesh as seen in a corpse which I designated by the name of body. In addition to this I considered that I was nourished, that I walked, that I felt, and that I thought, and I referred all these actions to the soul. (Descartes 1637–4 = haldane–Ross 1967 151, as quoted in Wilkes, 1992b, p. 114)

This picture is recognizably Aristotelian – for example, Descartes lists the capacities in the order that they appear in Aristotle’s hierarchy. It is this position which he takes as his main opponent, suggesting that it was at least fairly widespread at the time, widespread enough to argue for his own position.

Descartes’ picture is also fairly historically novel. In ways and for reasons explored further below, Descartes makes consciousness the core of his concept of mind. As Wilkes highlights, this goes along way toward proving its relative novelty, in light of corpus data: “The verb ‘being conscious of’, in its present (range of) sense(s), dates in English from around 1620, and the noun ‘consciousness’ does not appear until 1678; ‘self-consciousness’ does not crop up until 1690” (Wilkes, 1992b, p. 115).

2.3. *Why mind?*

So far, I think, we have seen the when and the where of the mind. Cross-culturally and transhistorically, the concept of mind appears to be primarily confined to Western Europe since the mid-17th century. Conversely, talk of emotions, beliefs, desires, pains, and so forth appear to be cross-cultural and transhistorical universals. It is hard, therefore, to see in what sense ascriptions of the latter could essentially depend on the former, or to believe that the former somehow constitutes “a story that we cannot avoid telling.” So why do we tell it? It is here, I think, that the answers of Ryle, Wilkes, and Rorty appear to be very weak, just as Toon and Hampshire claim. They claim that we tell it because we were misled by Descartes and his philosophical illusions.

2.3.1. *The standard story of anti-cartesianism*

According to Rorty and Wilkes's story, Descartes's motivations were *epistemological*. "Descartes needed a foundation of certainty wherefrom to combat the sceptic. He needed something which, as Hume was to put it, 'never deceives' First Enquiry (1748), § VII, pt. i, para. 52 = (1963), 66" (Wilkes, 1992b, p. 114). For Descartes, this was consciousness. Consciousness was the core of his notion of mind, his vision of humanity and its place in the world, and his view of the essence and make-up of human beings.

As to [the proposition] . . . *that nothing can be in me, that is, in my mind, of which I am not conscious*, I have proved it in the *Meditations*, and it follows from the fact that the soul is distinct from the body and that its essence is to think. (Descartes 1641 = Kenny 1970, 90; as quoted in Wilkes *ibid*)

For Descartes, a thought is essentially a thing of which one is conscious, and a human being is essentially a thinking thing:

Thought is a word that covers everything that exists in us in such a way that we are immediately conscious of it. Thus all the operations of will, intellect, imagination, and of the senses are thoughts. (1637–41 = haldane–Ross 1967, ii. 52, as quoted in Wilkes, 1992b, p. 115)

But what then am I? A thing which thinks. What is a thing that thinks? It is a thing which doubts, understands, conceives, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, which also imagines and feels. (Descartes 1637–41 = haldane–Ross 1967, i. 153, as quoted in Wilkes, 1992b, p. 114)

Descartes tries to cast the category *mental* as homogeneous – everything that is mental is a thought, which is essentially conscious. In Wilkes's eyes, he does so poorly. She focuses on perception, which "common sense does not naturally regard . . . as a form of *thought*" (Wilkes *ibid* p.117). Descartes considers the object that perception cannot be mental because it is possible to be mistaken about whether one is perceiving something

I have thought I perceived many things during sleep that I recognised in my waking moments as not having been experienced at all. (Descartes 1637–4 = haldane–Ross 1967 151, as quoted in Wilkes *ibid*)

He has to work hard to "[save] perception for the mind." He does so by "sleight-of-hand," sliding from the claim that *perceiving* is a form of thought to the claim that *seeming to perceive* is a form of thought (*ibid*, see also Rorty, 1979), and that this is the "proper sense" of perceiving.

it is at least quite certain that it seems to me that I see light, that I hear noise, that I feel heat. That cannot be false; properly speaking it is what in me is called feeling [*sentire*]; and used in this precise sense that is no other thing than thinking. (Descartes 1637–4 = haldane–Ross 1967 153, as quoted in Wilkes *ibid*)

Wilkes highlights the implausibility of this move, by Aristotelian lights, by pointing out that this form of argument proves far too much: walking can be claimed to be mental just on the basis that one cannot be mistaken that it seems to oneself that one is walking. In Wilkes's eyes, Descartes sets out to cast a *narrow* set of human capacities as *homogeneous*, and to claim that this homogeneous set of "mental" capacities gives the essence of the human. He fails to do so convincingly, and instead we are left with an arbitrarily narrow and heterogeneous grouping of human capacities.

This problem of heterogeneity only got worse over the history of the concept of mind. The emphasis on consciousness *alone* was unseated by the time of Brentano in the 19th Century, who '[revived] the medieval intuition that "the mental" tended to be *about* something; and so "intentionality" became another candidate-criterion for what it was to be mental' (Wilkes, 1992b, p. 115). The problem – as driven home by Brentano's student, Freud – was that not every intentional state is a conscious state. Following Rorty, Wilkes claims that this renders "the mental, and with it the mind" a "mess." Psychology, philosophy, and indeed the folk are "stuck with a concept 'mind' which purports to accommodate both the Cartesian emphasis on consciousness, and Brentano's stress on intentionality. The two do not fit well together" (Wilkes, 1992b, p. 116).

Descartes completes the "transition" to mind with a terminological shift:

men in the earliest times did not distinguish in us that principle in virtue of which we are nourished, grow, and perform all those operations which we are common to us with the brutes apart from any thought, from that by which we think they called both by the single name *soul* . . . But I, perceiving that the principle by which we are nourished is wholly distinct from that by means of which we think, have declared that the name *soul* when used for both is equivocal; and I say that, when *soul* is taken to mean *the primary actuality or chief essence of man*, it must be understood to apply only to the principle by which we think, and I have called it by the name *mind* . . . in order to avoid ambiguity (D 37–41 = haldane–Ross 1967, ii 210, as quoted in Wilkes, 1992b, p. 115)

In sum, the explicitly anti-Aristotelian Cartesian successor of the *psyche*, the mind, heralded a drastic rupture with the Aristotelian scheme, but is dualistic, gerrymandered, and not fit for purpose in Wilkes's eyes or in Rorty's.

2.3.2. *Patching up the standard story*

The Standard Story is frankly not very plausible. It appears to require that the world at large was deeply concerned with the problem of skepticism, such that it would exact great motivational force on their conceptualization of themselves, their fellow human beings, and the world. It appears to require that they bought several moves which Wilkes and Rorty claim to

be obviously implausible – the construal of human beings’ inner lives as a primarily conscious one, the construal of thought as essentially conscious, the construal of human beings as essentially thinking things, and the assimilation of perception to thought by conflating perception with *seeming to perceive* (roughly, thinking that one perceives; Rorty 1980; Wilkes, 1992b).

Unless Descartes was surrounded by a public which avidly read philosophy, was deeply concerned with skepticism, and was quite seriously foolish, something is clearly missing from this story – something that tells us *why* people were already inclined to believe in something very like the Cartesian picture, or perhaps even already believed in it. Such an addition to the story would remove the explanatory burden on Descartes, his influence, and his arguments. There are, I think, two key additional parts to the story: one a change, and the other a constant. The change is the development of experimental science. The constant is background beliefs about humans, their license to eat animals, and their admission to an afterlife.

I will begin with the constant. Rorty and Wilkes alike claim that Descartes’s key motivation was epistemological – that he wanted a certain foundation for human knowledge, and cooked up the mind to provide it. This is only part of the story. Descartes was perfectly clear and explicit about his other motivations:

he deliberately sought to suppress the idea of the soul as having a nutritive function. [...] He wanted to connect soul only with consciousness, and to reinforce this intention, he announced that he would drop the [word *animal/psyche/soul*] and substitute the [word *mens/noos/mind*]

(Sorabji, 1993, p. 98). This would, he thought, help us humans to “recognise the enormous difference between ourselves and animals” so that “we can understand much better the arguments proving that our souls are independent of the body’s death” (*ibid*, p.206). Descartes tried to revise the notion of soul so as to apply only to humans, and to do so partly by rebranding soul as “mind” – and it is here we find the origins of our modern notion.

Had his concerns been only epistemological, it is far from clear why he would have wanted to broaden the notion of mind beyond the notion of conscious thought at all – it plays no role in his argument. However, with this further motivation in mind, it becomes clearer: he wanted the foundation of certainty *also* to be the locus of immortality. He wanted a notion that aligned his epistemological concerns, his theological concerns about human immortality, and his ethical concerns about separating humans from animals. More than just conscious thought needed to be part of the mind because more than just conscious thought is important to us ethically and more than just conscious thought needs to survive into the afterlife if it is to be a happy one.

Descartes, however, was not acting in a vacuum. He was drawing partly on Aristotle's notion of *noos*, as emphasized and developed especially by Aquinas. As Kenny (1989), p. 7) puts it, "for Aristotelians before Descartes the mind [or *noos*] was essentially the faculty, or set of faculties, which set off human beings from other animals." Descartes, although emphasizing the importance of consciousness, and setting "the boundary between mind and matter [...] elsewhere" (*ibid*, p.8), "would have agreed with his Aristotelian predecessors that the mind is what distinguishes human beings from other animals" (*ibid*).

For Aristotle, this *noos* was the source of reason. Aristotle denied reason to animals. Like Descartes, Aristotle may well have had ethical motivations – "[h]is account in the *Nicomachean Ethics* of the happiest life for a human depends on finding something unique to humans" (Sorabji, 1993, p. 15). Additionally, he saw communal animal sacrifice as an important factor in "mak[ing] a city state as opposed to a mere conglomeration of people" (Sorabji, 1993, p. 171). The denial of reason to animals was supported by weak arguments and came at a serious theoretical cost: it required a reanalysis of many notions connected to *reason*, such as *perception*, *concepts*, *memory*, *deliberation*, *abstraction*, and *emotion* (Sorabji, 1993).

Both Descartes and Aristotle offer us a category that claims to contain a capacity or capacities that (a) are unique to humans, (b) survive death, (c) come with special ethical status, and (d) are fundamentally different in nature from all other human capacities. Aristotle has the virtue of *also* offering us *psyche*, grounded firmly in systematic observation, and of offering us a category which meets (a)-(d) without also being gerrymandered – but even so, Descartes's mind aims to be a friendly development and reassertion of Aristotle's *noos* just as much as it aims to supplant his *psyche*. Importantly, Descartes and Aristotle were not unusual in pursuing the search for something meeting criteria (a)-(d) – it was a key feature of the Western philosophical tradition (Sorabji, 1993), and remains important in scientific and ethical theorizing to this day (C. A. Chapman & Huffman, 2018; Gough, 2022b).

One reason that there was a need for a notion of mind, a slightly more encompassing notion than *noos*, drawing a more robust line between humans and animals, was that the Aristotelian-Christian worldview was under threat. The development of experimental science threatened the authority of the Church, and a religious worldview that was better expressed in words than in numbers (Hobart, 2018); optimism around science threatened the authority of religion and the worldview it expressed, while religious reactionaries posed a threat to the continued pursuit of experimental science (see also Merchant, 1980). Descartes was both highly religious, and a proponent of experimental science and its mathematical language. He offered a compromise: experimental science gets to take the whole world,

including animals, and the human body, but does not get any purchase on, to reiterate Rorty's list, "bodily and perceptual sensations . . . , mathematical truths, moral rules, the idea of God, moods of depression, and all the rest of what we now call 'mental.'"

This compromise was part and parcel with his views on the nature of experimental science – and its limits. He saw it as entailing a strict, sparse mechanistic metaphysics of the natural world – one where the laws of nature could be characterized entirely in terms of mechanisms which called upon only spatial parts, interacting only through motion and contact (Cottingham, 2006). This worldview was in stark contrast to the Aristotelian worldview it supplanted, one where reason was a feature of the order of the universe, functions and intentionality were widespread, and plants and animals had souls of a kind recognizably similar – albeit importantly different – to those of humans (for more on the historical and cultural background, see Hobart, 2018; Merchant, 1980). It is against this backdrop of sparse mechanistic metaphysics that Descartes came up with the concept of mind, and the corollary mind-body problem. The principles by which mechanisms operated, he thought, could not explain many of the capacities of human beings – the ones he counts as "mental."³

We are left with the concept of mind as part of a controlled *retreat* of the religious worldview away from this developing experimental science. A concept was needed that would draw a line between humans and animals, explain our access to the afterlife, and save some part of human beings from the encroachment of an experimental science aimed at control and disenchantment (Merchant, 1980). Some part of the human being needed to be saved for the authority of religion. The concept of mind modestly grants us just one inner space, to house everything that really matters – our thoughts, feelings, and memories, our understanding of, our outlook onto, and contact with the world, and of course, our morality. The most popular book in the Christian meditative tradition that inspired Descartes, by Saint Teresa of Avila, is entitled "The Inner Castle" (Mercer, 2017; St Teresa of Avila, 2019), and Descartes offers us just that: a fortified structure to protect the parts of us that matter most from the conquest of a cold, mathematized, dissecting form of experimental science.

It is worth noting how this picture contrasts with both theories of the origin of the idea of the mind considered by Melser (2004, ch.s 8,9). In broad agreement with the other anti-Cartesian, Melser takes it that the mind is supposed to either a "special place" where thinking happens, or an entity, located in that special place, distinct from the person, and responsible for thinking, and that there is no such thing (pp.157–158). Instead, he thinks, the agent of thinking is the just the person as a whole. However, Melser does not consider either version of the above anti-Cartesian story of the origin of the idea.

Melser considers first the “theory theory,” according to which the concept of mind is part of a quasi-scientific, “folk” theory of human beings, appealing either to the developing child’s positing of unobservables, innate theory of mind module, or inferences from introspection. He claims that all versions rely on the idea of a developing child trying to “find out what is going on in the other person’s head,” and dismisses this as implausible (2004, p. 164). He then offers his own theory, according to which the metaphors of mind are all that there is to the notion – there is no theory or concept associated with the notion. The idea of the mind is the combined result of taking too seriously nominalizations of the verb “to mind” (ch.9), and being “held captive” by a picture – of philosophers becoming “enmeshed in confusions because of a too literal, or too earnest and uncritical, reading of certain metaphors in colloquial speech” (p.176). The other anti-Cartesians believe neither that the concept of mind has its origin in the theories of the developing child, nor in Melser’s own theory – the concept of mind is the core of a culturally motivated and historically specific theory of the make-up of human beings, and the term “mind” is used in English because it was chosen to translate “mens” in contrast to “soul,” the translation of “anima.”

3. Using mind

So far, I have argued that the concept of mind is a novel concept, arising as a replacement to the Aristotelian *psyche* in the face of the development of experimental science in the mid-17th century, motivated by a complex of religious, ethical, and social concerns. It is therefore not an inevitable or universal part of our venerable and widespread human practice of attributing “mental” states to ourselves and one another. I have done so by building on the work of Ryle, Rorty, and Wilkes, using other relevant work in history and anthropology. The question then becomes whether we should want to retain this concept – that is, whether it is a useful one. I lack the space to argue in full that the metaphor of mind is harmful, rather than useful. However, I want at least to point to the many arguments that it is harmful, in order to show that its utility cannot simply be taken for granted.

To infer that the concept is useless or harmful just because of its origins would be to commit the genetic fallacy – the concept’s original function may not have been good, but that tells us little about the way that it currently functions. Ryle argues that the concept is a confused mess (if taken literally – a point amenable to Toon’s case); Rorty claims that it has “no use outside of philosophy books, and [link] up with no issues in daily life, empirical science, morals, or religion” (1979, p. 22), which seems patently false if taken literally; Wilkes (1992a, 1992b) argues that it is obsolescent in psychology, and appeared optimistic at the time of her writing that psychology

would soon recognize this and return to the Aristotelian *psyche*, an optimism which has been frustrated.

A more recent author working in this strain of anti-Cartesianism, Gough (see especially 2024a), argues that the concept is actively harmful as it is used in psychology, psychiatry, and cognitive science. Gough focusses primarily on the contemporary use of the concept, arguing that – perhaps due to its initially poor definition and initial heterogeneous extension (see Gough, 2024b §4) – it has come to act as a “pluralistic concept,” used to pick out distinct categories and phenomena in different contexts of use, in a way which results in widespread conflations and confusions, as well as many fruitless definitional debates (see Gough, 2024a). He argues that, in its role in characterizing the disciplines, it harms the reception of psychology, psychiatry, and cognitive science, their self-understanding, and views of what is at stake in categorizing things as within their subject-matter or not (Gough, 2022a, 2023b) – these disciplines and their results are falsely taken to bear on the mind, in roughly the Cartesian image, and parts of these disciplines that study phenomena that are not conventionally considered “mental” face undue controversy or are wrongly seen as marginal (*ibid*). He further argues that in its role in “construct formation,” characterizing phenomena of interest, there remain visible lingering concerns about what make humans special, often tied to throwing marginalized humans under the bus (Gough, 2021a, 2022b, 2022d).

One might think that the issues with scientific and medical uses of the concept of mind are compatible with Toon’s position – that it reflects a problem with taking too seriously a mere metaphor. However, it is far from clear that this is so. These problems appear to result from the use of “mind” and “mental” as a mere *shorthand*, one which is not taken seriously enough to be used as an explanatory term or to frame inductive generalizations (Gough, 2024a; Wilkes, 1992a) – which seems compatible with mind being understood as a mere metaphor. Additionally, many of the problems seem to result from taking seriously the coherence of the “primary domain” of the metaphor (certain patterns of complex behavior, of the sort picked out by mental state terms), which Toon also appears to take seriously, and treating it as a scientific subject-matter.

One might also think that these problems do not speak to the question of whether or not the metaphor is useful *for the folk* in their understanding of themselves and other people. I believe that this is incorrect. Folk understanding and scientific understanding are not isolated from one another, but in constant conversation. Many of the problems Gough points to are to do with the *public* reception and understanding of psychology, psychiatry, and cognitive science – the false view of autistic people as “antisocial loners lacking in empathy” that results from the “theory of mind” theory of autism

(Gough, 2021a); the view of mental illness as under the control of its sufferers, “all in the mind,” and illegitimate as a form of illness (Gough, 2023b, 2024a); the idea that if the immune system is part of the subject-matter of psychology, then one can think oneself into better health and out of illness (Gough, 2023a); the overweighting of neurological evidence in courtroom settings (Gough, 2024a); and “folk neurodualism,” the combination of dualism and neurocentric materialism that results in the idea that the mind is highly sensitive to effects from the brain but not *vice versa* (*ibid*).

Wilkes (1988, 1993a) and Gough (2024a) claim that both sets of problems result to a significant extent from a core part of the metaphor of mind: the bipartite vision of human beings that it encourages and relies on. In this vision, human beings are the combination of a physical body made of simple matter and something else, where this something else is responsible for all (and only) “mental” activities and capacities, and whether this something else is an immaterial mind or an information-processing brain. As Wilkes (1988) argues, this mind-body distinction offers no home to many of the subpersonal information-processing capacities talked about in psychology, and no home to many bodily but person-level states such as hunger and dizziness. Unlike the highly structured *psyche* that Wilkes (1992b) finds in Aristotle, which starts from the interrelatedness of all the “vital” capacities of human beings (those characteristic of living organisms), the metaphor of mind and its bipartite vision of human beings sits ill-at-ease with the close relationships between, on the one hand, “bodily” capacities such as immunity, respiration, heart-beat, and digestion and, on the other, “mental” capacities, “mental” illnesses, and “mental” life (Gough, 2023a, 2024a).

Even aside from these problems with the reception and understanding of science and medicine, the metaphor of mind encourages an impoverished picture of human beings. Self-knowledge and introspection were, for the Greeks and the Romans, not a matter of exploring a single inner-space (an idea encouraged by the dominant Christian meditative tradition that influenced Descartes; Mercer, 2017), but instead of reflecting on oneself, one’s place in the world, one’s past, and one’s relationships (Foucault, 1988; Wilkes, 1992b, 1993a). The concept of mind, and its commitment to a single inner space separate from the body (at least, the body beyond the brain), involve a degradation of the body (Leder, 1990), one which many feminist theorists have taken issue with and cast as highly masculinized (Davies, 2019). In the Cartesian scheme “[we] are locked into our solipsistic consciousness;” because of the influence of the Cartesian scheme, “the legacy of the lonely ego crying in the wilderness is still with us” (Wilkes, 1992b, p. 120); this image of solipsistic, isolated human beings feeds into an idea of human beings as separable and separated from each other and their social context which many argue feeds into contemporary atomism and the neglect of the importance of the social to our wellbeing (Gough, 2022c;

Wilkes, 1992b). Finally, the bipartite view of human beings, and its commitment to a single privileged inner space where the magic happens, obscures the many different ways that a human being can be constituted, and the many different legitimate ways of being a flourishing human being, including by leaning heavily on social and environmental aids – a view that especially harms the neurodiverse and cognitively disabled (R. R. Chapman, 2023; Drayson & Clark, 2020; Glenn, 2022; Gough, 2024a; Manalili et al., 2023). By way of contrast, keeping notions and metaphors of interiority, while eliminating the metaphor of mind and its commitment to a single inner space, allows and encourages views of human beings as multipolar, multipartite, containing multitudes, and able to be realized in many ways.

There is another body of work that indicates that the metaphor of mind is actively harmful – work on the concept of the *bodymind*. A bodymind is, roughly, a whole person or organism, containing the whole complex of their inner processes. The term “bodymind” was coined for feminist disability studies (Price, 2011, 2015). It has been put to work in queer disability studies (Clare, 2017), antiracist theory (Schalk, 2018), work on neurodiversity (Walker & Raymaker, 2021), and legal scholarship (Nedelsky, 2011). The concept of the bodymind is based on an explicitly anti-Cartesian rejection of the concept of mind as a tool for understanding human beings. A core claim is that categorizing phenomena or processes as mental or non-mental is counterproductive, and that using the concept of mind introduces a false and unhelpful presupposition of separateness. For example, Price argues that the complex process to be explained, in particular pain and desire, involves conventionally “mental” and “physical” processes that “not only affect each other but also give rise to each other – that is, because they tend to act as one, even though they are conventionally understood as two” (2015, p.269). Schalk claims that in order to explain and understand the experience and “psychic” stress of oppression, it must be understood that “processes within our being impact one another in such a way that the notion of a physical versus mental process is difficult, if not impossible to clearly discern in most cases” (2018, p. 269). The habitual application of the metaphor of mind therefore seems to present a barrier for oppressed groups understanding themselves, and making themselves understood.

The concept of *mind*, and its role in understanding human beings, is relatively novel, reasonably culturally specific, and therefore not inevitable; there are also good reasons to suspect that it is harmful rather than helpful. As stated in the introduction, this does not contradict Toon’s idea that metaphor is involved in mental state attributions and their apparent commitment to representational states. However, it undercuts some parts of his argument for that position, and throws into question the category *mental*, which he uses to set the scope of his position.

There is another key aspect of Toon's position which my argument here is not intended to undermine, and which I think is an insightful part of his views: the idea that we are such complex systems with such complex behavior that our understanding of ourselves and each other ineliminably involves metaphors (see also Danziger, 1997, 2008; c.f.; Melser, 2004). Interestingly, by Toon's lights, he would on this issue find himself in agreement with at least one of the "anti-Cartesians" I have been discussing here: for Wilkes, the Homeric, Aristotelian, and Cartesian visions of human beings are all best understood as "models" (1993a); for Toon (2012), models are "make-believe," and operate on principles similar to metaphor. The anti-Cartesian position as I have laid it out may well agree with many parts of the spirit of Toon's position; the core disagreement is not about the role of metaphor, but about whether the metaphor of mind is a good one for understanding human beings. Ryle, Rorty, Wilkes, Melser, and Gough say no – the metaphor of mind is historically and culturally contingent rather than unavoidable, and rather than useful, it is deeply flawed, encouraging a deeply confused and impoverished view of human beings.

Notes

1. It is a little hard to know what to make of Toon's inevitability claim in light of his refusal to take a stance on these historical questions, and in light of his later claim that talk about the mind should be expected to vary across times and cultures (2023, pp. 122–126). His remarks on pp.122–126 are enlightening. He suggests that societies very different from our own, and with a different set of cognitive tools than our own, such as preliterate societies, "will have a very different concept of mind from our own" (pp.123–124) – this seems at least to suggest that they still *have* a concept of mind in some form or other, which Toon seems to take to essentially be some kind of inner world throughout. This is one form of "inevitability" which is consistent with both the *precise* metaphors familiar to us being unfamiliar to those of other times and cultures, and the inevitability of the concept of mind.

Another form of "inevitability" which Toon might endorse, indicated when discussing both how the concept of mind might vary and elsewhere (pp.34–35, p.100), is that terms for particular mental states, and the metaphors associated with such terms, might furnish us ways of capturing and describing human behavior at particular times and in particular cultures, patterns that we are otherwise unable to capture and describe. This may be so, but is not directly relevant either to the concept of mind, or to my argument below – talk of many particular mental states is found at many times and in many cultures that do not appear to have a concept of mind. The inevitability of, eg, belief-metaphors (given such-and-such a pattern of behavior) tells us nothing about the inevitability of mind-metaphors.

Finally, one reviewer suggests that Toon could be taken to mean that the metaphor of mind is inevitable for *us*, in *this* culture, *now* – that we cannot get by without it because there are no good alternatives available to us. This is not a claim for which Toon directly argues, and as argued below there are reasons to doubt both (a) that it is in fact a "good" option in the first place, and (b)

that we do not currently have other ways of thinking about our behavior, ourselves, and our interiority – indeed, many of those we in fact use fit poorly with the concept of mind and its vision of interiority.

2. Albeit in some directions that may have harmed its reputation.
3. It is worth noting that the motivating view of natural science is in tatters. The toolkit of science has been drastically expanded since the days of Descartes: the range of models available, mathematical tools available, and conceptual frameworks has drastically increased in the last century alone, with computational models, systems theory, complexity theory, sustained study of self-organization and self-maintenance, and the development of new technologies of experimentation and measurement. It has perhaps been in tatters since physics abandoned its strict mechanistic framework and began to countenance forces, in part motivated by the new science of chemistry (Chomsky, 2002). With changes in the workings of science, views of science have also changed: various metaphysical, methodological, and model pluralisms now profligate across the philosophy of science, as theories more closely tied to contemporary science and its best practices have been developed, theories of scientific modeling, knowledge, and the entailments of scientific findings. The picture of the world that emerges from this body of theory is neither sparse nor adequately understood through a single strict style of modeling, but highly complex, hard to predict, and full of surprises (eg, Cartwright, 1983, 1999; Dupré, 1993; Ruphy, 2017; Wimsatt, 2007), especially when considering the spectacular phenomena that can arise from the interactions of many simple parts.

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