

Preface

Some years ago I published a paper called “From Robots to Rothko: the Bringing Forth of Worlds.” It came in two versions. The first was alive with new-doctoral-student revolutionary fervor; it was radical and confident, but lacked a certain kind of philosophical rigor (Wheeler 1996a). The second presented a far more careful reworking of the arguments (Wheeler 1996b). These days I rather prefer the first version, but that’s neither here nor there. By building on a number of views that were very much in the cognitive-scientific air at the time, this paper, in both its manifestations, attempted to establish (i) that orthodox cognitive science (classical and connectionist) is committed to a generically Cartesian account of mind, (ii) that this Cartesian-ness is a problem, and (iii) that an alternative, non-Cartesian cognitive science may be constructed by fusing together Heideggerian philosophy, an explanatory framework based on dynamical systems theory, and various AI-related insights culled mostly from new forms of robotics. Whatever their respective merits, the two versions of “Robots to Rothko” shared a similar problem: they failed to make the case.

What I thought I needed was more space. My doctoral thesis (Wheeler 1996c) gave me that, and, indeed, that work does, I hope, constitute a fuller and more powerful exploration of the ideas. However, I knew that significant problems remained. What I really needed, of course, was more time: time to develop my interpretations of Descartes’s and Heidegger’s philosophical frameworks; time to work through, in proper detail, the various issues and arguments raised by my project (especially those concerning the nature and status of representation); time to understand the complications presented by the proposed alternative view; and time to allow some of the then-new species of empirical work on which I was drawing (e.g., evolutionary robotics) to reach scientific maturity. It seems

that striking while the iron is lukewarm is sometimes the best strategy in philosophy.

This book presents the fruits of such a strike. In the intervening years the overall argument and the final position have been significantly transformed—along some dimensions, beyond all recognition. Of course, personal history is of limited interest: it is extremely unlikely that most readers of this book will have read “Robots to Rothko” or (even less likely) my doctoral thesis. However, with respect to the super brief summary of my earlier view as given in (i)–(iii) above, I should perhaps say that there is now an important (albeit ring-fenced) place for orthodox (Cartesian) cognitive-scientific thinking within the final framework on offer, and that the proposed relationship between Heideggerian philosophy and the ongoing reconstruction of cognitive science is now far more subtle. I hope, however, that my attempt to work things out in a way that is philosophically and scientifically more compelling has not led to all the revolutionary zeal and energy of that new doctoral student being sacrificed.

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