

Margaret Dauler Wilson: A Life in Philosophy

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Margaret Wilson, who died last year, has been described as the most eminent English-language historian of early modern philosophy of her generation. She was President of the Leibniz Society of North America for four years, from 1986 to 1990. Within this organization she is remembered both for her contributions to Leibniz-studies and for her attention to and support of younger researchers and her governing role in the Society.¹ Her Harvard Ph.D. dissertation on “Leibniz’s Doctrine of Necessary Truth,” written under the supervision of Morton White, was completed in 1965, and she went on to write a number of papers on Leibniz in the late 1960s and early-to-mid 1970s, including “Leibniz and Materialism,” “Confused Ideas” and “Leibniz’s Dynamics and Contingency in Nature,” returning to Leibniz in the late 1980s and early 1990s with such articles as “Compossibility and Law” and “The Phenomenalisms of Leibniz and Berkeley.” Over the course of her career, Wilson published two books, her dissertation, which appeared in a series issued by Garland in 1990, and *Descartes*, published by Routledge and Kegan Paul in 1978, as well as more than thirty papers on seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophy, nearly all of which are included in the recent volume from Princeton University Press, *Ideas and Mechanism*. She held a number of research awards and honorary fellowships, including a Fellowship in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences to which she was elected in 1992.

There was a *mystique* surrounding Margaret Wilson. At a time when there were few women holding regular appointments in philosophy, her professional advance was rapid. After holding temporary positions at Columbia and Rockefeller Universities, she moved to Princeton to become Associate Professor of Philosophy in 1970 and was promoted to Full Professor there at the age of 36 in 1975. She was the first woman to join the Princeton department and the first to be tenured there, but she took little overt interest in feminism, and if she considered her situation to be unusual or to present problems of a particular nature, as she must have, she kept her thoughts on these matters almost entirely to herself. She was often described as shy or reserved, but she wrote in a confident and occasionally in a confrontational style. A cool and rather cerebral person, she could radiate warmth and charm. She had an aversion to styles of writing she regarded as overly subjective, but she was sensitive and aware of others’ needs and predicaments. As a teacher she often reproached her students with their lack of clarity, but she is truly a difficult author.

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Unlike Harry Frankfurt, Alan Donagan, Barry Stroud, Nicholas Rescher, Robert Sleigh, Jonathan Bennett, Robert Adams, Bernard Williams, and others who worked concurrently with her on early modern topics, she was exclusively a historian, though her analytical acuity and her interests in perception and causation might have disposed her to take part directly in current controversies in metaphysics and philosophy of mind. Curiously, her eminence as a historian is usually mentioned in connection with the formal characteristics of her work, notably, her rigour, judiciousness, and integrity. There has been no consensus as to what she brought by way of interpretation to the history of philosophy, and what her sense of her own contribution was. It is important to try to make this out; the reviews of her posthumous book may help to answer this question—then again they may not.

There is no denying the formal achievement. According to the obituary notice composed by Beatrice Longuenesse, Harry Frankfurt and George Pitcher, Wilson's principal achievement was to establish "unprecedented standards of scholarship and analytic rigour in modern philosophy from Descartes to Kant," and they refer to her unusual integration of historical and analytical approaches. Some historiographical background can perhaps explain why the elevation of the standards of scholarship and the integration of approaches were so important to our profession. Wilson began work on seventeenth century philosophy at a time when, outside of Asia and continental Europe, history of philosophy was not considered a *bona fide* area of specialization, or rather it was thought of as an area occupied by those who were not able to "do philosophy" on their own in the right way.

In England and in North America, it was taken for granted in my student days that an aspiring professional philosopher would have received a basic training in the classics of Western philosophy sufficient to equip him to teach the required survey courses to undergraduates and to make progress in his own chosen area of research. A competent young Ph.D. should know enough Descartes to think fruitfully about the mind-body problem; enough Locke to think about personal identity and meaning, sufficient Hume to think intelligently about causality, and sufficient Kant to think about ethical principles. In many departments it was regarded as somewhat shameful to be a full-time practicing historian of philosophy: the implication was that what one did was not very different in kind from what undergraduates did. Like his students, the historian read, say, Descartes's *Meditations* or a piece of Locke's *Essay*, made some criticisms of the ideas or made some criticisms of other people's criticisms of the ideas. Though this was admittedly "doing philosophy," it seemed to have little direction and impetus: there was nothing to build on or overturn, and such persons did not seem to be pulling

their weight in the more competitive locales. Those historians who worked with evident zeal and purpose because they were looking for philosophical truth through historical writings were a positive embarrassment to their colleagues, for they appeared to be searching for timeless wisdom about the human condition or to be preoccupied with questions such as Idealism or The State, about which it is impossible to say anything new or precise.

A graduate student of this era who happened to get interested in competing interpretations or formulations of a doctrine, or its reception, or the influence of one philosopher on another, or the role of a “minor” historical figure was conceived to have left philosophy and to have gone over to intellectual history.

Specialists in ancient philosophy were less likely even then to be viewed as non-philosophers or semi-philosophers. Their field had always carried considerable prestige, thanks to the place of the classics in the Oxford and Cambridge curricula and the arduous training, the tight organization, and strict standards obtaining in that field. Kant-studies were fully international, were appreciated to be intellectually demanding, and were highly competitive, as they still are. But the history of modern philosophy, in between, looked different. There were of course distinguished historians of philosophy—Richard Popkin, Harry Bracken, John Yolton, Edwin Curley, Quentin Skinner—working in relative indifference to the distinction between history of philosophy and intellectual history, but, in philosophy departments, history of philosophy was not thought to be a field in which the term “brilliant” had any application, as it might in philosophy of science or philosophy of language, or metaphysics. The history of philosophy attracted women, as the history of science had earlier, not only because they often possessed the requisite linguistic skills, but because the field was not particularly prestigious, involved mainly solitary work, and was suited to persons who lacked full-time employment.

Wilson was, I think, troubled by this state of affairs, and it is true that her main accomplishment was to contribute to the gradual elevation of the history of modern philosophy to the specialist status it enjoyed in other parts of the world. She did so not just by applying rigorous standards of argument and by insisting, as the ancient philosophers already did, on appropriate language-training and the use of standard editions, but by taking on an unprecedented range of authors and issues for an analytically-oriented historian and by addressing a set of problems in epistemology and philosophy of mind that spanned the hundred years between approximately 1630 and 1730 and that were entangled and interrelated. She dealt as confidently and knowledgeably with Berkeley as she did with Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza or Locke, and each of her articles is self-contained and distinct. Unlike the beginning

student or the amateur lover of ideas, the specialist, in her view, approached the text in its original form and apprehended it in the context of previous handling. But, unlike the “antiquarian” or the philologist, the specialist historian was interested in two things: the accuracy of interpretations, considered as theories of the meaning of the text, in the face of the evidence provided by the words of the text, and the philosophical coherence of a doctrine, once its best interpretation had been decided. Wilson’s seminars were devoted in equal measure to the constructive work of establishing the best interpretation, given the data set of available texts, and the critical work of assessing the absolute viability of a claim once its proper formulation had been arrived at.

Wilson was fond of pointing out the inadequacies of philosophers, especially those whom she thought had been unwisely venerated as the originators of exceedingly clever arguments, or as fountains of truth and wisdom, but she was even more interested in pointing out the folly of the venerators themselves. She concluded a paper on Berkeley with characteristic decisiveness: “Berkeley cannot maintain both his own perceptual variability arguments for idealism, and his claim to side with common sense on the presence of colors in things.”² She denied that Spinoza had anything important and original to tell anyone about the mind-body problem. “Contrary to what some commentators have said,” she wrote smoothly in “Objects, Ideas and Minds,” “Spinoza is unable to reconcile his theory of ‘minds’ with any intelligible conception of mental representation, or any coherent and credible account of the scope of conscious awareness.”³ This particular paper argued that the identification of the human mind with God’s idea of the human body was another example of “the commitment to the relevance of the theory of God’s ideas to traditional issues and assumptions about mentality ...[which] has thoroughly unmanageable consequences and leads Spinoza to confusion and incoherence.”

Together with John Yolton (with whom she had some significant disagreements) Wilson was largely responsible for the attention given subsequently to early modern theories of perception. The title of the collection *Ideas and Mechanism* summarizes the central issue for her. Briefly, it was this. Seventeenth-century philosophy had two faces. On one side, it aggressively portrayed scholastic “forms” “visible species” and the “animal soul” as useless fictions, preferring a Democritean account of qualities as conventional, of vision as a process modelled by optical instruments, and of life and action as the product of “mechanical” operations in the body. For increasing knowledge of the anatomical structure and functioning of the sensory organs and the rest of the body had suggested to philosophers that experience was

caused by or conditional upon the pressure of particles, rays, or waves whose existence could be inferred, though they were not themselves objects of experience, and that all or most of what happened in bodies, with the exception of the exercise of free-will, happened in consequence of their organization rather than through the activities of a soul. On the other side, they had to contend with the fact that the type of causal relationship or conditionality involved was impossible to model adequately, insofar as a single observer could not see the cause bringing about the effect. No scientist could see something mechanical bringing about an idea, or a volition bringing about a movement. Descartes's discovery of the logical opacity of awareness, to wit, his discovery that he could conceive himself thinking, experiencing, imagining, and willing without conceiving any bodily processes whatsoever established the priority of ideas, for the possibility that mechanisms themselves *were* merely ideas was actually more coherent than the possibility that mechanisms *explained* ideas. So a fiction—Cartesian mental substance with the powers of representation and volition, and with the power to represent its own acts of representation and volition—replaced the old set of scholastic fictions. This was a thrilling invention and it happened to function very well to express the uniqueness and moral superiority of humans in the universe and their special aspirations. In one of the first articles in English to grapple with Leibniz's mysterious "Paris Notes," Wilson considered his "somewhat euphoric" attempt to prove the immortality of the soul by reflecting on his own reflective capacities.⁴ But the Cartesian soul did not function very well in other contexts and it could never be fully integrated with the new sensory-motor paradigm. From "Leibniz and Materialism," published in 1974, onwards Wilson was interested in the ways in which philosophers beginning with Descartes writhed under the dilemma, uncertain whether to be awed by the unity of science that could bring the mysteries of life and mind within its purview even if it could not fully account for them, or whether to be awed by the independence of mind from nature and to pursue that line of thought. She discovered that they were philosophically resourceful in trying to relate the scientific to the anthropocentric image, but also incoherent.

The previous generation of commentators had not, she thought, appreciated the real context of early modern century assertions about knowledge and perception. These topics had been approached mainly from the perspective of A.J. Ayer's famous discussions of phenomenalism and the criticisms of Sense-Data theory by Direct Realists. But latter day phenomenalism and sense-data theory, as well as Paul Grice's causal theory of perception, were essentially attempts to construct an account of perception that would capture the range of ordinary usages of the term

and that would be different from but complementary to, whatever contingent account science ended up delivering to us. Descartes, Wilson realized, was not trying to fashion such an account, nor was Berkeley, even if his theory looks like just such a “pure philosophical” account. As she explained in the introduction to *Ideas and Mechanism*, a predilection for “foundationalism” or a habit of asking “questions generated from within ordinary experience” were irrelevant to their projects. Because historians of philosophy had ignored Cartesian physics, physiology and optics, they had assumed that Descartes was trying to offer either an account of first-person awareness or a causal realist account of perception. It was rather the case that both Descartes and Berkeley—along with Leibniz—were responding to an external provocation—mechanism—that had little influenced epistemology and philosophy of mind before the mid-seventeenth century.

In the Preface to her 1978 book, Wilson purported to be giving a “somewhat different over-all reading” of Descartes’s philosophy from the accounts given by Frankfurt and by Anthony Kenny, whom she mentioned respectfully. She stated her belief that “Descartes had virtually no sense of the problems of ‘privacy’ and meaning, of identity and reference that have...come to seem increasingly fundamental to epistemological and metaphysical issues. He had little understanding of, or respect for, the concept of formalization.” She apologized for what she described as his failings, as well as for what was “quaint... strange...and naïve.” But, in an anticipation of what was to become her major theme she wrote that “Descartes somehow grasped in a very deep way the relations between modern scientific concepts and certain fundamental philosophical problems, especially those having to do with knowledge and the self.”⁵

Wilson argued persistently that there was no Cartesian theory of perception advanced in the *Meditations*, that attempts to read it within the conceptual framework of the later controversy between direct perception theories and sense-data theories, and between realists and representationalists had to ignore vast stretches of the text. Commentators who made Descartes out to be a direct-realist, and commentators who credited him with a “veil-of-perception” theory were both in error, although both had at the same time got something right. The direct-realists had grasped that Descartes was not, after all, a skeptic, and that he believed that sensory experience provided orientation in the real world. The veil-of-perception theorists grasped that Descartes thought that the visual world of experiences was utterly different from the world as it is in itself. Descartes, on her reading, was a non-skeptic who happened to think that the world is not as we perceive it to be, and there is nothing wrong with thinking that that is how things

are, so long as it is realized that two different fields of explanation and sets of criteria are being appealed to. Confusion arose when commentators failed to separate the “philosophical” issues of the *Meditations* from the physical-physiological issues addressed by Descartes in his optical and medical writings. “I see no good reason,” she writes, “for denying to Descartes, the scientist, a... kind of abstraction from the skeptical and scientific realist commitments addressed in the *Meditations* and certain parts of the *Principles*.”⁶

Wilson’s method of looking for discrepancies between commentary and text or between text and text was employed in a sustained and occasionally ferocious way. Though she would have been horrified by the label, she was a sort of deconstructionist *avant* (or just *sans*) *la lettre*. She liked to show the reader that there was no theory there in the sense in which a theory had been expected, and certainly no precursor of any “modern” theory:

I have pointed out problems in reconciling texts in which Descartes holds that all ideas of sense—particularly the most “confused” ideas of the qualities of bodies—are innate with texts that indicate that our ideas of bodies have to come from without. I have tried to establish the prominence of the presentation model of sensation in Descartes’s works....

I have [also] acknowledged the strong presence in many texts of a conception of the relation of brain states to mental sensory ideas which seems to avoid the problems of the presentation model. I have argued however that certain attempts to construe this nonpresentation conception as foreshadowing respected modern views about causal connections neglect significant features of Descartes’s actual statements....⁷

Wilson was looking for a deep interpretation that did not so much salvage the philosopher’s theory—for she considered, I think, all the great philosophers to be deeply incoherent thinkers—as explain why the contradictions and inconsistencies that did appear were not mere lapses of judgement but directly traceable to a central dilemma. She wanted, as Janet Broughton has emphasized to me, to reach a verdict about the claims and arguments she studied, and if the verdict was negative, as it normally was, there had to be a deep and interesting reason why the claim had seemed initially so presentable. It is not easy to determine whether her assessment of Descartes’s representationalism has come to be generally accepted, but her original account of Descartes’s intentions in writing the *Meditations* is commonplace by now, and indeed it is sometimes credited to others.

Wilson’s *Descartes* appeared in the same year as Williams’s *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* and Curley’s *Descartes Against the Skeptics*, both

important books offering different overall interpretations. This coincidence was a mixed blessing. It encouraged journals to review all three books together and placed Wilson in fine company. But of three joint reviews, only one gave equal mention to each of the authors.⁸ In the other cases, the reviewers mentioned Curley and Williams approximately twice as often as Wilson, although they did not appear to value her book any less. Was this because, as late as 1978, the efforts of women were still perceived unconsciously, by other women as well as by men, as less solid, less weighty than those of men? Or was it because critical engagement with a woman posed, and still poses, delicate problems? Few reviewers want to take the gloves off and look like a chauvinist or a jealous competitor—or to praise too lavishly and appear utterly smitten, so the temptation is to be polite and distant. In any case, the book received some intelligent and thoughtful notices, remains in print, and continues to be cited.

Though one might have expected Wilson to ally herself with the historians of science in view of her conviction that foundationalism was not the real concern of the *Meditations*, she never closed ranks with them against the analytic historians of philosophy, whom she criticized on an individual basis but identified with as a class. She wavered between the conviction that scientific concerns were basic to the interpretation of what superficially appeared to be purely philosophical concerns, and the conviction that there were purely philosophical concerns. In a way that is somewhat difficult to understand, she was critical of those who approached Locke as a contemporary of the chemist Robert Boyle. Maurice Mandelbaum, for example, had argued in his seminal *Philosophy, Science and Sense-Perception* of 1974 that Locke had sought to establish his distinction between primary and secondary qualities on the basis of his corpuscularianism, not as a distinction given in experience, and he, together with Peter Alexander and John Mackie, had accused Berkeley of missing the point in responding to Locke's distinction with *a priori* arguments. Wilson insisted that Berkeley had understood what Locke was up to perfectly well and had responded in an appropriate way.⁹ Her point of departure was that while philosophers might have been motivated by empirical considerations, including speculative hypotheses, they knew they had to give *exact arguments* and what they addressed as philosophers were each other's arguments, not the whole body of reasons—inherited, speculative, etc.—for generally thinking something to be true. In her *Philosophical Review* article of 1992, she noted that “the strong recent emphasis on Locke's Boyleanism seems finally to be giving way to a broad awareness that most of the elements of Locke's position on sensible qualities were in fact pervasive in early modern philosophy from Galileo and Descartes on.”¹⁰ Of

course she was right about this, but the remark reveals her rather non-historical temperament. For historians, progress is made when broad awareness of background influences gives way to precise tacking down of proximate sources, of which the Boyle-Locke link uncovered by Mandelbaum was an example.

The case against the “irrelevance theory” was not quite decisive. Mandelbaum’s point was that Berkeley used a prioristic arguments against Locke, who was using a theory “confirmed as a scientific hypothesis,” which was therefore a lot stronger than Berkeley and anyone impressed by Berkeley’s argument that primary qualities are perceptually relative took or takes it to be. Wilson thought that Berkeley’s system—at least in this respect—had strong positive features. She came out on the right side of this exchange, I think, both because she was aware that Berkeley was not ignorant of corpuscularianism but deeply hostile to it, and because it has come to seem in retrospect something of an exaggeration to speak of the “explanatory success” of the corpuscularian theory. When one looks hard, the “evidence” for it really was more philosophical and literary-anecdotal than empirical. But it was a victory somewhat at odds with her recognition that the scientific image and the manifest image were sharply distinguished for most seventeenth-century philosophers, and that irrelevancies threatened for this very reason. She did not read back her frustration with contemporary philosophers of perception into Berkeley. In any case, Wilson believed that philosophers were distinct from scientists and that historians of philosophy were *philosophers* in an important sense that historians of science were *not philosophers*. These are still very obvious propositions to many people, and bitter conflicts have even arisen in places where disciplinary divisions have not been enforced, but an effect of that article was actually to focus attention on Berkeley’s rather sporadic and grudging attention to corpuscularianism, which Ian Tipton had noted earlier. Several papers on this topic by various authors followed, including some with distinct history-of-science overtones.

Although Wilson argued that young scholars might become interested in history for a variety of reasons—in the hope of finding their current problems illuminated, or for the “philosophical growth [resulting] from exposure to comprehensive and systematic philosophical thought,” or just the enjoyment of history,¹¹—she was reluctant to concede that the appeal of the history of philosophy had anything to do with the appeal of history generally. Many “regular” historians enjoy the pageantry of history, the colors, the shifting relationships, politics and betrayals, free and forced decisions, and some historians of philosophy as well are attracted by these aspects of the subject. But Wilson was little interested in secondary

figures for their own sake, and, unlike some of her students, she did not have the temperament of the archivist. The curious and arcane held no charm for her, and one would conclude from her bibliographies that she was not a heavy user of libraries. Her method of working was to read—very completely and repeatedly—the works of the canonical philosophers and to read what her contemporaries and immediate predecessors had to say about them. She then tried to think out, more carefully than the philosopher himself or anyone subsequently had, exactly what argument was being advanced and how it might be going wrong. So Wilson strove for a difficult middle course, in which the analytic methods of looking for proposition-by-proposition consistency and inconsistency were deployed, but without adopting the assumption of the earlier analytic philosophers looking at the seventeenth century that the problems of the philosophers were cut off from science.

For its centenary issue in 1992, the *Philosophical Review* asked Wilson to write an article on “History of Philosophy Today.” The wearing effect of years of tension over the place of the history of philosophy in her department and in the profession, little of it productive, were evident in this article, which has been valued rather for its explication of the problem of manifest qualities than as a program statement for historians of philosophy. Wilson nevertheless made a number of points about method in the article that bear thinking about. Whether or not one agrees with what she said, her defense was the reverse of what might have been expected and free from the grandiose banalities that are usually wheeled out when people are called upon to defend the study of the history of anything. She noted the upsurge of activity in the history of philosophy, the number of new translations and commentaries published, the proliferation of international conferences devoted to historical figures, and asked how likely all this was to bear “philosophical fruit.” Was there a sharp division between “philosophers” and “historians of philosophy”? Were the latter likely to advance philosophy *per se*? Wilson gave a qualified negative answer to the first question and a qualified affirmative to the second. She accepted the premise that historians of philosophy were concerned with the interpretation of the philosophers of the past, whilst philosophers were concerned with developing and defending positions of their own. She argued that although the tasks were different, the same personnel were often engaged alternately in both tasks, and that two discrete types of skills and mentalities did not therefore characterize historians and philosophers, leaving it more than a little unclear, however, why she had remained exclusively on the history side.

Where the question of contemporary relevance was concerned, she did not try to argue that the early modern period was a rich source of ideas, or that it was replete

with unthought-of alternatives, or even that that practice in the criticism of historical figures would help today's innovators to see the flaws in their own arguments. She was reluctant to suggest that philosophers without historical knowledge and curiosity were at an intellectual disadvantage relative to those who possessed it in ample quantity.¹² She saw that the new professionalism of the history of philosophy, with its attention to detail, and its ability to explode and fragment positions, tended to make history of philosophy useless to theorists trying to get something out of it for themselves. For if historians did not agree on what a given figure's position was and could not state a coherent version of a philosopher's doctrine, how could a philosopher of mind, or an epistemologist, or a logician be expected to work profitably with it?¹³ Rather, she offered a version of Santayana's maxim that those who do not understand history are doomed to repeat it. She argued that contemporary philosophers were caught in the grip of older epistemological models that analytical historians had shown did not work. Hence, the development and defense of genuinely new theories would be better served if philosophers were historically informed. "Philosophizing about sensible qualities ought to have been altered more than it in fact has been by post-seventeenth-century developments," she maintained, singling out Colin McGinn's appeal to primary and secondary qualities as an example of the problem she was talking about. A distinction formulated in the terms of seventeenth-century corpuscularian science from a confused blend of empirical and a priori considerations, she pointed out, could not be imported into the twentieth century context, in which our understanding of the material world and its relationship to sense perception could not support it, and she argued that contemporary accounts of colour again imported an antiquated and misleading notion of "colour sensations."¹⁴ The mind-body problem too suffered from the weight of anachronistic baggage. Philosophers were still carrying on arguing about it without managing to say anything new, she thought, when there were only a few solutions, all of which had already been thoroughly canvassed in the seventeenth century. Either we can have "brute assertions" of causation, correlation or identity [between mind and body] without intuitive plausibility—i.e. without there being any recognizable similarity to familiar examples of causation, correlation, or identity, or we can avail ourselves of the "theological option."¹⁵ We can wait hopefully for something better to turn up, but for now that is as far as we can go.

Wilson went on to defend analytic history of philosophy against the accusation that it typically distorted the philosopher's meaning to push him closer to some contemporary paradigm, and she rejected the contextualism of the editors and

authors of the *Cambridge History of Philosophy* for many of the same reasons she never closed ranks with historians of science. She agreed that too much Descartes-commentary was cut off from Descartes's "announced revolutionary scientific and scientific realist objectives...."¹⁶ But she remained committed to the reconstruction and criticism of principal arguments that had always characterized her work. Finally, she questioned in her article what contemporary philosophers think they are doing when they try to "incorporate" science:

The confident sharp distinction between "philosophical" and "scientific" claims, exemplified by D.J. O'Connor and others cited above, has been muted in the works of many philosophers who see themselves returning to a form of philosophizing that is in some ways open to "what science tells us." But making philosophy "scientific" does not make it science. If philosophical work, at least in some areas, is no longer supposed to be *independent* of scientific results and theory, then what is its specific and peculiar role in telling us in what, say, the nature of colors consists?¹⁷

It is often said that a person's intellectual traits manifest themselves both as strengths and as weaknesses, and this was true of Wilson's work. A strength of her work was its range. She dealt, as noted earlier, with Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, Berkeley, and Kant. But at the far end of that range, for example, in considering Kant's empiricism, her interpretation became arguably somewhat eccentric. Another strength was her low tolerance-level for what she considered shoddy work in others. She was willing to destroy an entire topic—"Descartes's theory of perception"—rather than to "rescue" it with adaptations that were not faithful to the text. But as a result, she was apt to take too heavily to task commentators who had made perceptive identifications and comparisons, on the grounds that such comparisons did not bear close scrutiny. The view that Leibniz's and Kant's idealisms were similar to Berkeley's was superficial, she argued, and indicated great carelessness on the part of its proponent. "Failure adequately to recognize this point is partly the result of insufficient attention to variations of meaning, across different contexts, of the term 'phenomenalism' itself and terms commonly used in the definition or characterization of 'phenomenalism' like 'perception' and 'experience'."¹⁸ But the emphasis on exactness and fidelity to all available texts led necessarily to the sort of theoretical failure that she so often detected, and it doomed most comparative work from the outset since nothing is exactly like anything else. Berkeley's, Leibniz's, and Kant's phenomenalsms *are* internally related, one wants to insist, and perhaps the reason for the "incoherence" of so many of the old systems is that each philosopher builds anew but ultimately with no more stability with bits and

pieces retrieved from the ruins of other philosophers' systems.

From time to time Wilson had inserted a reference to the literature on animal perception and animal awareness in a way that suggested that vitality and consciousness not just in humans but in other creatures as well held a special interest for her, and in December 1994 she gave a talk on "Animal Ideas" as her Presidential Address to the American Philosophical Association in Boston, suggesting that the terms of the Descartes-More debate might assume some actuality.¹⁹ She was, as those close to her often observed, unsentimental in work and life, and not given to the open expression of emotion, and I doubt that she was particularly sentimental about animals. Yet there is a consciousness of suffering that pervades her later work that renders it somewhat different in choice of subject and in style than the majority of her published papers. In the last paper she gave at the Leibniz Society she brooded on the dark implications for moral theory of Spinoza's disturbing, yet hardly thoughtless, remark that because we cannot join ourselves in friendship to the animals, they have no moral claims on us and can be used however we wish for our greater pleasure and convenience. In 1992 she delivered a paper to the Harvard Graduate Society, printed in their *Newsletter*, which, she explained in the Introduction to the Princeton volume, she did not want to republish because of its "impressionistic" nature. But although the quotations she read out on that occasion would perhaps have been overly familiar to an audience of professional philosophers, the thesis of the paper was entirely clear and definite, and not in the least impressionistic. The talk contrasted Pascal and Spinoza in their diagnoses of anxiety and malaise and their different assessments of the available spiritual or secular remedies. It brought out very beautifully the contrast between Pascal's theology and Spinoza's naturalism, but showed how the two philosophers shared an underlying orientation to loss and illness. Fear, in Pascal's case, of falling into what he called "the abyss," and, in Spinoza's case, of the dissipation of our personal integrity by emotion, seemed to be at the heart of their ethical systems. Both systems, she argued, were flawed; Spinoza's was overly ambitious, Pascal's superstitious and cowed, and both located salvation in "a transcendent and hidden principle" that was merely an evasion.

Those who were in touch with Margaret Wilson before she died were aware of the personal courage with which she faced her diagnosis and her refusal to enter into the desperate seeking and false hopes of so many patients in her situation. We do not know whether she faced the end of life with the help of any philosophical categories at all, or whether, as her Harvard paper suggested, her intellectual severity exposed as useless the most hallowed of them, but she took her farewells most

thoroughly and affectionately, as though she insisted on keeping distinct, in her usual unsparing way, the discontinuity of death from the continuity of her attachments.

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Notes

¹ An author's disclaimer is in order here. I was a graduate student at Princeton from 1974-1977 but did not specialize in the history of philosophy. I profited nevertheless from taking two courses with Margaret Wilson, a seminar on Descartes's *Meditations* and a reading course on Leibniz, and she was one of the examiners of my thesis. I benefited from her help and advice later on when I began to work on seventeenth-century philosophy. I am grateful to her former Ph.D. students and colleagues who have shared their impressions with me, especially to Christia Mercer, Janet Broughton, and Robert C. Sleight, who have offered many insightful suggestions and essential corrections.

² "Berkeley on the Mind-Dependence of Colours" in *Ideas and Mechanism* (hereafter *IM*) Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999, pp. 229-243, p. 241

³ "Objects, Ideas, and 'Minds'," in *IM* pp. 126-140, p. 126 She shows herself somewhat more sympathetic, but still mistrustful in "Spinoza's Theory of Knowledge," in Don Garrett, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 89-141.

⁴ "Self-Consciousness and Immortality in the Paris Notes and After." *IM*, pp.373-387.

⁵ Preface, *Descartes*, p. viii

⁶ "Descartes on Sense and 'Resemblance,'" *IM* pp. 10-25, p. 17.

⁷ "Descartes on the Origin of Sensation," *IM* 41-68, p. 59

⁸ Peter Schouls, in *Philosophical Books* 20 (1979) pp. 61-66.

⁹ "Did Berkeley Completely Misunderstand the Basis of the Primary-Secondary

Quality Distinction in Locke?" in *IM*, pp. 215-228.

¹⁰ "History of Philosophy Today; and the Case of the Sensible Qualities" in *IM* pp. 455-494, p. 473.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 464

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 463.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 462.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 478-9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 480.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 460.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 481.

¹⁸ "The Phenomenalisms of Leibniz and Berkeley," in *IM*, p. 308.

¹⁹ "Animal Ideas," in *IM*, pp. 495-512, p. 495.