What the seventeenth century contributed to the problem of the relation of philosophy to science may be summed up in Descartes’s new concept of thought—a thought totally distinct from its cause yet existing in the mind. To Descartes, as too for Locke and Hume after him, human languages were conventional systems, governed by the Will. But Ideas were independent of the Will and therefore the nearest thing to a universal Natural Language. These three philosophers believed that we do not think with Words, but with Ideas. Today, too, perceptual thought is considered to be distinct from its cause, but some philosophers, like Wittgenstein in the early 20th century, for example, rejected the idea that perceptions exist in the mind.

Locke, following on Descrates’s innovative use of the term idea, defined knowledge as the agreement or disagreement of ideas. To many of his readers, this definition seemed to deny knowledge its objective status because it equated knowledge with subjective Ideas. The philosophers of the seventeenth century, the century of the Scientific Revolution, launched the new concept of perceptual thought as caused perceptions. That this was indeed a new concept may be seen in the objections voiced by the Dutch Jesuit Caterus, author of the first Objections to Descartes’ Meditations, who wrote:
my question in this: what sort of cause does an idea need? Indeed, what is an idea? It is the thing that is thought of, insofar as it has objective being in the intellect. But what ‘is an objective being in the intellect’? According to what I was taught this is simply the determination of an act of the intellect by means of an object. (*Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 2 (1984), 66–67)

To Caterus Ideas signified or denoted no-thing.

Descartes’s answer to this objection was that an idea is indeed something, and not nothing, and hence it must have a cause. His answer indicated that he was dealing not only with a new concept of thought, but also with a new concept of knowledge and reality. The new concept of knowledge, as a collection or string of ideas, emphasized the mental nature of knowledge, and in maintaining the distinction between body and mind, this knowledge, according to Descartes, did not embody any material reality—it was simply a perception.

This change in the concept of Thought led Hume, one hundred years after Descartes, to sum up the new philosophy as the Doctrine of Ideas, which stressed that knowledge as thought could not include in it any part of the known object. What for later philosophers was very perplexing was the question how this concept of knowledge could result from what we call the Scientific Revolution? in other words, could knowledge severed from the known be anything but subjective? Could it lay claim to any kind of objectivity?
Later philosophers concentrated their criticism on Cartesian epistemology, the cause and theory of knowledge, and the question of clear and distinct ideas. However, Descartes and the British Empiricists could hardly be called epistemologists. They never asked the question, ‘do we know or not?’ As for Descartes’s skeptical gimmick—Cogito ergo sum— it was invented by him for the special purpose of softening the impact of the new concept of Thought as caused by matter,

whatever I have till now accepted as true I have accepted either from the senses or through the senses. But from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once. (Descartes Works, pp. 12).

And it is in this context that we should understand the place of God in the Cartesian Meditations, a God who causes our ideas. Thus, even for Descartes, Thought was too sacred for it to be merely caused by matter. And it is here that we can assert that philosophy is, and always has been, a philosophy about Thought. For, how else can we interpret the fact that a philosopher like Descartes, whose speculations were wholly devoted to Science—to physics, optics and mathematics—has been read and is still being read as a philosopher of Mind?

In order to stress the importance of the nature of thought in European philosophy we should remember that in the 18th century Berkeley adopted the Doctrine of Ideas in his
Theory of Knowledge, yet insisted that ideas are caused only by God. It is this aspect of Berkeley’s philosophy—the insistence on the divine cause of ideas and not on the non-existence of Matter—that was the main focus of his speculation. (Although, as we know, later generations tended to reduce his philosophy to its so-called immaterialism.)

But this was not sufficient to secure the sacred status of Thought. Kant rejected any causal explanation of Thought, arguing that causality has nothing to do with Empiricism, but is a Transcendental (innate) Category of Thought, of how the Mind works. Limiting human understanding to phenomena, Kant makes Skepticism an inherent dimension of our knowledge: we can not know things in themselves. Furthermore, to think that we could prove the existence of God, as Descartes had thought, was simply inconceivable, a pure impossibility.

Kant was so successful in making skepticism an inbuilt dimension of thought, that Russell, though rejecting the transcendental concept of causality and Kant’s notion of experience, continued to deplore the limitations of induction compared to deduction, seeing it as flaw in our capacity to think. Because for Russell Ideas were purely subjective, the only way of upholding Empiricism was to reject the whole 17th-century Doctrine of Ideas. This led Russell to initiate the Linguistic Turn in Philosophy whereby the philosopher no longer deals in Ideas but analyzes language in terms of meaning. He followed Frege in defining thought not as something in the mind but as a meaningful sentence or proposition.
For Wittgenstein, when he was writing the *Tractatus* in captivity, during the First World War, Frege’s translation of thought into a proposition was a neutral use of the concept of thought, which he adopted as synonymous to a proposition. He had no use for skeptical arguments in the *Tractatus*, because for him the Mind or Soul, and the meaning of life or Ethics, were beyond the scope of language. To him the belief in the causal nexus was no more than a superstition: the meaning of a proposition in not caused by perception but is a picture of reality.

However, Wittgenstein’s Transcendental Mirror that allowed language to be a picture of reality was too reminiscent of the Cartesian Mind, and thus limited language to the positivistic knowledge of Facts. Naturally, the later Wittgenstein found that adopting Russell’s concept of meaning would indirectly lead him back to the problem of Thought: the correlation between an object and its name in Russell’s theory of meaning was, at the very least, problematic, because it turned linguistic analysis back to Ideas, precisely what the theory was supposed to resolve, undo, or overcome.

Wittgenstein’s transition from the concept of *meaning* to the concept of *use* reveals the extent to which he was prepared to go to keep the *sacred* concept of thought unverbalisable in principle. I am alluding here to the Private Language Argument, the centerpiece of his *Philosophical Investigations*, in which Wittgenstein criticized the Cartesian Cogito or the notion of perceptual thought.
In what sense are my sensations private?—Well, only I can know whether I am really in pain—another person can only surmise it—in one way this is wrong and in another nonsense… (Philosophical Investigation, Section 246).

But what is surely the outcome of Wittgenstein’s successful rhetoric—a rhetoric invoking the function of language for inter-subjective communication—is that it points to the Cartesian Cogito as the cause of the breakdown of communication. I call this “a piece of rhetoric” because it made the relinquishing of the use of the concept of Thought the *sine qua non* for continuing philosophical discourse. This injunction is reminiscent of the Jewish prohibition on uttering the Name of God. And this comparison is especially suggestive, given the similarity of aims of the Jewish theologians and of Wittgenstein in avoiding the sacrilege of uttering the Forbidden Name of God or of naming/defining Thought, respectively.

However, if we are to return from the realm of thought to the realm of morals, we see that Wittgenstein has led his disciples into a blind alley. One of his distinguished disciples, J. L. Austin, at the end of his *How to do things with Words*, expressed his hope that among the various uses of language, the performative use of words might resolve the riddle of Ethics. For the general view at the time was that moral propositions are meaningless or merely emotive statements.

This hope was translated in a variety of ways in numerous books, and authors like Martha Nussbaum and Cora Diamond, for example, tried their hand at reviving interest in moral
philosophy through the analysis of literary texts. This, surely, was an interesting intellectual outcome of the Private Language argument. I say “intellectual outcome” rather than “practical outcome” because of its barrenness in the sphere of morality. Ethics is not transcendental, as Wittgenstein would have it in the *Tractatus*. Ethics is the unsaid, tacit/silent dimension of how we live language as a story-telling activity. We live stories, narrative forms of life, by siding with good against evil. Good and evil are just the way we side with some characters against other characters in life as in fiction. Nevertheless, we cannot live with this hopelessly relativistic Ethics, which is why it is replaced by implicit or explicit legislations that impose leading stories as the Sacred source of morality—The Bible, the Koran, etc. These leading stories invoke transcendental or divine authority to justify their moral code and authority.

In conclusion, we can say that, in one way or another, philosophers have always been involved with the problem of Thought and, as such, were intentionally or unintentionally opposed to the secularization of the concept of Thought. The ghost of Natural Religion (the explanation of religious faith by reason) still lives on in philosophy despite Hume, who, in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, thought he was putting an end to it.

I would like to offer my own concept of Thought: I am a Cartesian. I assume that the only thoughts we have are perceptual thoughts. Nevertheless, it is through Language, the means for creating our forms of life, that we live our stories as a free re-arrangement of the elements of perceptual thought. It is this imaginative creation of thoughts and their
circulation—the stories we tell—which is at the origin of our disagreements about thoughts, about ideas, about philosophy.

Tracing here the changing status of the terms “idea” and “thought” from Descartes to Wittgenstein and his followers, has brought me to the realization that philosophical ethics is a branch of religion; it is not a meta-discourse but is on the same level and is thus continuous with the stories we live, and the stories we read and hear, in the course of our ordinary, daily lives. The insistence on the sacred origin of thought, whether in the case of Descartes or of Wittgenstein comes as a warning against the abuse of human knowledge: for the freedom to inquire is bound by an ethical imperative, or in the words of Genesis, book 3, verse 22: “And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil.”

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