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DESCARTES' SOLITUDE THESIS: A NEGLECTED ASPECT OF THE CARTESIAN METHODOLOGY

Abstract

Recent research has defended the surprising thesis that in many cases the search for truth is better off if the information exchanged between the members of an epistemic community is limited. This is what one may call the limited information thesis. There is, however, the possibility of an even more radical position than this: the thesis that any communication between peers has zero epistemic value and that the search for truth is better off if the truth-inquirer does not take into consideration the truth-claims of her peers. This can be called the solitude thesis. The paper defends the claim that Descartes is a supporter of the solitude thesis with respect to metaphysical inquiry. The defense is facilitated by means of interpreting textual evidence found in Descartes' essays *Discourse on the Method*, *The Search for Truth* and the *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

Keywords: solitude, Descartes, metaphysics, truth, the Other, learning, teaching, method

1. The Problem

Recent research in economic theory, social epistemology and philosophy of science has defended the surprising thesis that in many cases the search for truth is better off if the information exchanged between the members of an epistemic community is limited.¹ This is what one may call *the limited information thesis*. The thesis is 'surprising' because the currently dominant view in epistemic communities is that the more information about a relevant subject matter one receives from one's peers, the better one's chances of epistemic success are. As concerns the community of scientists in particular, the dominant view is clearly manifested in the common practice of scientific journals to demand that the authors should take into serious consideration the ideas of their peers and ignorance of 'what is going on in the literature' is considered a vice.

Despite their unorthodox position, however, the supporters of the limited information thesis do not take the full step of rejecting epistemic communication altogether. *Some* communication between peers is needed if the search for truth is to be realized. Taking that full step would make one a supporter of what may be called *the solitude thesis*. This thesis states that any communication between peers has zero epistemic value and that the search for truth is better off if the truth-inquirer does *not* take into serious consideration the ideas of her peers.

The present paper argues that Descartes is, in at least some of his writings, a fervent supporter of a version of the solitude thesis. In particular, the claim is that there is significant textual evidence in the Descartes corpus that he believed that as concerns *metaphysical* inquiry the quest for truth is better off if the one who produces metaphysical theory does not take into serious consideration the ideas of other metaphysicians. By the term 'metaphysics' Descartes understands the *a priori* inquiry into the fundamental determinations of being, what one may call 'fundamental reality'. The metaphysician who produces metaphysical theory will be called *metaphysician-projector*, so as to distinguish her from the *metaphysician-receiver*, who is the metaphysician who takes into serious consideration a metaphysical theory or metaphysical ideas proposed by another metaphysician (the Other). Of course, the metaphysician-projector *can* be also metaphysician-receiver; but for the supporter of the solitude thesis the metaphysician-projector would be better off epistemically if she were *not* also metaphysician-receiver.

Descartes' support for the solitude thesis has never been allowed to take central stage in Cartesian scholarship. Such great Descartes scholars as Cottingham, Kemp-Smith, Williams, Curley, Gaukroger and Wilson emphasize the philosopher's intellectual struggle to avoid reference to authority and reach knowledge undogmatically, but they never emphasize (or even mention) that according to Descartes this entails that the inquirer into metaphysical truth should *never* take into serious consideration any truth-claims coming from her peers and that she can discover the whole metaphysical truth *all by herself*.² In fact, despite thorough research on the issue, I have not been able to discover even a single article that discusses Descartes as a supporter of the solitude thesis.³ This in itself is curious enough to justify an investigation into the matter.

The aim, then, of the paper is to substantiate the claim that Descartes is, in at least some of his writings, a supporter of the solitude thesis. The injunction 'in at least some of his writings' clarifies that the evidence

looked for is *local*, not global. The distinction between local and global textual evidence is made with respect to the evidence found in the work of an author. Whereas local evidence is the one provided by a *part* of the whole work, global evidence is the one provided by the *whole* work. The local textual evidence for substantiating the claim in question will be found in Descartes' *Discourse on the Method* (hereafter 'DM'), *The Search for Truth* (hereafter 'ST') and the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (hereafter 'MFP'), all of which cover a period of writing between 1635 and 1641.

Descartes' method does not apply only to metaphysical knowledge; it is envisioned to pervade also the fields of empirical and mathematical knowledge. There is a general methodological structure that repeats itself in each of these cognitive fields. Although the question of the identity of the method across disciplines is fascinating, what is more important for our purposes is the fact that Descartes *distinguishes* metaphysical from empirical and mathematical knowledge. It is quite evident from certain passages found in the works we have proposed to investigate that Descartes' *scientia* has a part that corresponds solely to metaphysics.⁴ Even though mathematical and part of empirical knowledge can have foundational roles in the system of all knowledge,⁵ it is metaphysical knowledge that is considered the ultimate foundation of such a system.⁶ While mathematical and empirical knowledge cannot have validity unless being grounded on metaphysical knowledge,⁷ the latter grounds itself. Metaphysics, which Descartes sometimes calls simply 'philosophy',⁸ has as its subject matter concepts deriving directly from rational thought (reason, *ratio*), such as 'thought' and 'existence', transcendent objects, such as God and the soul and, as ST reveals, universal determinations of the fundamental structure of *all* objects in general ("[the determinations of] all the things in the world, *considering them as they are in themselves*"⁹), such as extension, space and motion.

The present paper is interested *only* in substantiating the claim that Descartes is a supporter of the solitude thesis with respect to inquiry in *metaphysics* – that he cancels out the epistemic contribution of the Other in the context of such an inquiry. Of course, the question whether his support of the solitude thesis stretches to cover also the fields of empirical and mathematical knowledge is vastly important: what exactly is, according to Descartes, the epistemic role of the Other in an inquiry in mathematics or physical science? Despite its significance, the question will not be discussed in this paper. Suffice it to say that there are two passages in DM where Descartes undoubtedly *denies* the truth of the

solitude thesis regarding that part of *scientia* which requires elaborate empirical observation and conduct of experiments.¹⁰

2. *Discourse on the Method*

Descartes' *Discourse on the Method*, first published in 1637, but being written over the winter of 1635-36, contains one of the most powerful expositions of the solitude thesis in the history of philosophy. DM functions as an introduction to the Cartesian system of *all* knowledge and aims at specifying the basic, most general attributes of the proposed method. As already pointed out, the method has a general core that runs through all cognitive disciplines, but has also features that are peculiar to each discipline. In this section we will discuss Descartes' presentation of his method in DM *insofar as it applies to metaphysical knowledge*.

The basis of his argument is the belief that the discovery of metaphysical truth, as well as of any other truth,¹¹ is purely a matter of method – it is not a matter of 'special powers' possessed by certain individuals. Each and every metaphysician is able to disclose metaphysical truth as long as she or he follows the right method,¹² since "reason [...] exists whole and complete in each of us."¹³ Descartes, then, is anxious to establish from the outset an 'equality' among the members of the community of metaphysicians: they all have the same and an equal amount of cognitive power (reason) and what will distinguish the one from the other is whether or not one follows the right method.

Descartes next moves on to comment on the speed of metaphysical inquiry; as he puts it, "those who proceed but *very slowly* can make much greater progress [...] than those who hurry [...]."¹⁴ It is evident from the context that the progress he is referring to is 'progress in knowledge', i.e. epistemic progress. He also mentions that it is essential requirement for succeeding in acquiring "knowledge of truth"¹⁵ that the metaphysician "increase[s] [his] knowledge *gradually* and raise[s] it *little by little* to the highest point."¹⁶ These two epistemic attributes, slow pace and gradual development, play a key role in the arguments of the supporters of the limited information thesis. Kevin Zollman, for example, has argued that a truth-inquirer who proceeds with slow pace and develops her inquiry gradually has higher positive probability to achieve epistemic success *if the information she receives from her peers is decreased* than if this information is increased.¹⁷ This is why Zollman advises not only that truth-inquirers

must be given sufficiently long time to work on their projects, but also that “when we want accuracy [i.e. the truth] above all else, we should prefer [epistemic] communities made up of more isolated individuals.”¹⁸ The crucial question, for us, is this: Does Descartes hold a similar view with respect to metaphysical inquiry?

In order to answer this question we must turn our attention to an attribute of the Cartesian method that is peculiar to metaphysical inquiry. This, together with ‘the Cogito’, is the attribute Descartes’ metaphysical part of *scientia* is most famous for: the quest for metaphysical truth should *begin* with the act of leaving aside – that is to say, the act of no longer taking into serious consideration – *any metaphysical truth-claim whatsoever*. The reason for this, Descartes explains in a Pyrrhonian fashion,¹⁹ is that there was not even a single idea he *received from other metaphysicians* which was not a matter of dispute.²⁰ All the process of receiving metaphysical ideas has offered him hitherto is that he “came to think [that he] had gained nothing from [his] attempts to become educated but increasing recognition of [his] ignorance”²¹ and that “there was no knowledge in the world such as [he] had previously been led to hope for.”²² Due to this ‘universal doubt’, Cartesian metaphysics begins with a retreat to the *solitary* self – this is not a self who is *unable* to communicate with others (solipsism), a brain-in-a-vat, but rather a self that *chooses* to isolate herself in order to increase her chances of epistemic success in the realm of metaphysics. The isolation of the self has here the specific meaning of an act of (a) removing the value of truth from each and every truth-claim contained in the metaphysician’s mind and (b) terminating the influx of truth-claims proposed by other metaphysicians into that mind. Thus, to the question we raised earlier the following preliminary response must be given: Descartes takes a much more radical stance than Zollman concerning the connection between slow pace and gradual development, on the one hand, and the transmission of information between peers, on the other, for he maintains that such a slow pace and gradual development must *begin* from a state of affairs in which *all* receptivity of information has vanished (whereas Zollman demands only that the received information be *limited*).

Nevertheless, this does not *yet* entail that metaphysical practice²³ will be forever shut to information coming from other metaphysicians – hence the preliminary character of the response above. Indeed, there is still the possibility that it begins from a non-receptive state of affairs and then reaches a stage at which the reception of truth-claims from other metaphysicians is allowed to be reintroduced. As noted, Descartes’ idea

of *empirical* inquiry (namely that inquiry which is based upon empirical observations and experiments) seems to permit an empirical scientist's receiving ideas from other empirical scientists. Metaphysics provides the ultimate ground of the sciences,²⁴ but there where metaphysics ends the empirical scientist is allowed to start communicating with her peers and taking into serious consideration their ideas and empirical findings.²⁵

But what holds for the empirical part of *scientia* does not hold for its metaphysical part. The metaphysician-projector should develop her metaphysical theory from beginning to end without at any stage incorporating truth-claims from other metaphysicians. For Descartes, not only the beginning, but also the development and completion of the metaphysical theory must take place in a context of absolute epistemic solitude (in the specific sense of one's *not* taking into serious consideration the truth-claims of other metaphysicians). He writes that the metaphysician must "direct his thoughts in an *orderly* manner, by beginning with the simplest and most easily known objects in order to ascend little by little, step by step, to knowledge of the most complex [...]." ²⁶ This 'orderly' construction denotes a *necessary interconnection* between each stage in the development and the one that follows it,²⁷ as it happens in "those long chains" of geometrical reasoning.²⁸ For Descartes, the necessity of a metaphysical content has its ground on the fact that its generation is owed *solely* to the metaphysician-projector's 'clear and distinct' reflection upon the metaphysical content that precedes it.²⁹ Like Hegel, Descartes believed that *all* metaphysical content must emerge in an orderly fashion from the thinking of the *solitary* self.³⁰ In the remainder of the present section I provide textual evidence in support of this particular claim (the claim, namely, that the Other makes absolutely no contribution to metaphysical inquiry).

On what grounds does Descartes maintain that the metaphysician-projector is able to generate a complete and true metaphysical content based solely upon her own thoughts, without receiving any information from other metaphysicians? The justification of this claim rests upon three fundamental beliefs: first, that in principle each and every metaphysician's mind contains the same complete rational powers as any other;³¹ second, that the whole truth about a 'rational' subject matter is fixed and expressible (as Descartes puts it, "since there is only one truth concerning any [rational] subject-matter, whoever discovers this truth knows as much about it as can be known"³²); and third that the orderly, systematic application of complete rational powers upon a 'rational' subject matter can disclose the whole truth about that subject matter.

The systematic significance of epistemic solitude for the Cartesian system of metaphysical knowledge explains Descartes' immensely strong language when he describes the beginnings of his own metaphysical practice. He informs us that he broke free "from the control of [his] teachers" and "*entirely* abandoned the study of letters."³³ Recalling his thoughts before he began his metaphysical quest, he tells us that he resolved "to seek no knowledge other than that which could be found in [himself] or else in the great book of the world;"³⁴ given what he has already told us, it should not surprise us that he does *not* here refer to any 'knowledge found in or received from others'. He emphatically stresses that the revolution in his thinking came when he isolated himself in "quarters where, finding *no conversation* to divert [him] [...], [he] stayed all day shut up *alone* in a stove-heated room, where [he] was completely free *to converse with [himself] about [his] own thoughts.*"³⁵ And when he refers to the moment when he finally decides to write down his metaphysics, he stresses his "resolve to move away from any place where [he] might have acquaintances [...] [and] lead a life *as solitary and withdrawn as if [he] were in the most remote desert.*"³⁶ I think it cannot be denied that the significance of solitude, of the absence of communication with other metaphysicians could not be conveyed more emphatically.

But maybe one would object at this juncture that the autobiographical character of the above extracts does not permit their function as theoretical support for the solitude thesis. This, of course, is true, but given that they describe the conditions under which Descartes began formulating a theory he himself believed to be epistemically successful, they most certainly give out his hostile sentiments about the epistemic value of the communication with other metaphysicians. Additionally, they help the reader vouch for the solitude thesis when they are combined with the purely theoretical remarks that follow, most of which specify reasons why allowing the ideas of others to influence you is epistemically harmful in the domain of metaphysics.

To begin with, consider the following remark:

[...] There is not [...] so much perfection in works composed of several parts and produced by various different craftsmen as in the works of one man.³⁷

This passage expresses the view that (a) the involvement of more than one person (or, if you will, the involvement of the ideas of *others*) in the creation of a work and/or (b) mixing up various external elements to create

a work *reduces the amount of perfection* one could find in it. Descartes supports this view by reference to various paradigmatic examples, some of which are particularly interesting: He tells us that “buildings undertaken by a single architect are usually *more attractive and better planned* than those which several have tried to patch up by adapting old walls built for different purposes;”³⁸ that “ancient cities which have gradually grown from mere villages into large towns are usually *ill-proportioned*, compared with those orderly towns which planners lay out as they fancy on level ground;”³⁹ and that “if Sparta was at one time very flourishing, this was not because each of its laws in particular was good [...], but because they were devised by a single man and hence *all tended to the same end*.”⁴⁰ All these examples show, according to Descartes, “how difficult it is to make something perfect by working [...] on what others have produced.”⁴¹ He then carries the analogy from ‘craftsmanship’ to metaphysical practice, providing thereby justification for the solitude thesis:

[...] Since the [metaphysical] science contained in books [...] is compounded and amassed little by little from the opinions of many different persons, it never comes so close to *the truth* as the simple reasoning which a man of good sense naturally makes [...].⁴²

He repeats a similar view a few lines farther:

[...] A majority vote is worthless as a proof of truths that are at all difficult to discover [such as the metaphysical truths]; for a single man is much more likely to hit upon them than a group of people.⁴³

The general idea here is that allowing the ideas of other metaphysicians to influence the construction of a metaphysical theory decreases the perfection of that theory: this can only mean that it decreases its chances of epistemic success. Descartes is quite explicit: a metaphysical theory that takes into serious consideration the ideas of others “never comes so close to the truth” as the metaphysical theory that develops properly from the thought of a single metaphysician (and the ‘proper’ character of the method entails, as the examples make quite clear, that the metaphysician begins from a single idea, not from a multiplicity of ideas). The involvement of the ideas of others has a distorting or disorienting function, as it takes metaphysical thought out of its course by bringing into it a variety of ends and a plethora of unnecessary complications and difficulties. This variety of

ends and complications do not spring from the same source and, therefore, do not have that unity that is so essential for developing an epistemically successful metaphysical theory. Thus, the solitude of the inquirer is preferable because it increases the perfection of the constructed theory, unifies it into a single purpose, and reduces the amount of unnecessary and irrelevant complications in it.

Descartes ends his supportive remarks on the solitude thesis in DM by considering the objection that the debates among metaphysicians help the metaphysician-projector sharpen the details of her position and correct her mistakes:

It may be claimed that such controversies [between peers] would be useful. Not only would they make me aware of my mistakes, but also they would enable others to have a better understanding of anything worthwhile that I may have discovered; and, *as many people are able to see more than one alone*, so these others might begin to make use of my discoveries and help me with theirs.⁴⁴

This is an objection most contemporary philosophers would be sympathetic to; in fact, I would insist that it comprises the essence of our modern conception of scientific practice. Surely, they would argue, engaging in dialogue with our peers would make us aware of our mistakes and help us and others understand our theory in a better way. The development of a theory, the search for truth, requires group effort (i.e. the involvement of the ideas of *many*) in order to lead to epistemic success.

It is, though, more than evident from what Descartes has already told us and from what follows the above cited extract that the thesis that “many people are able to see more than one alone” may be a thesis espoused by his contemporaries but certainly not by Descartes himself (at least as regards metaphysical practice).⁴⁵ Indeed, in what follows the passage Descartes expresses his belief that the communication with others has *absolutely no epistemic value* in the domain of metaphysics:

[...] My acquaintance with the objections that may be raised prevents me from expecting any benefit from them. For I have already had frequent experience of the judgments [of others]. But it has rarely happened that an objection has been raised which I had not wholly foreseen, except when it was quite wide of the mark. Thus I have almost never encountered a critic of my views who did not seem to be either less rigorous or less impartial

than myself. *Nor have I ever observed that any previously unknown truth has been discovered by means of the disputations practiced in the schools.*⁴⁶

Any objection raised by other metaphysicians, any 'critical' observation made by them does not offer anything substantial to the search for truth, so Descartes, as long as, of course, the inquirer follows the right method. Any contribution by the Other is, we would say, *superfluous*, since the Cartesian metaphysician can reach and express metaphysical truth all by herself. Moreover, it is not only that the communication with others is of no help with the search for metaphysical truth – it is also that it is *disruptive* of and *harmful* to this search:

[...] As for the observations that others have already made, even if they are willing to communicate them to [the metaphysician-projector] [...], they are for the most part bound up with so many details or superfluous ingredients that it would be very hard for him to make out the truth in them.⁴⁷

And he concludes with the following two astonishing passages, a crystal-clear affirmation of the solitude thesis:

I think I can say without vanity that if anyone is capable of making [...] additions [to my metaphysics] it must be myself rather than someone else – not that there may not be many minds in the world incomparably better than mine, but because no one can conceive something so well, and make it his own, when he learns it from someone else as when he discovers it himself. This is especially true in the case under consideration [i.e. metaphysics].⁴⁸

In short, if there was ever a task which could not be accomplished so well by someone other than the person who began it, it is the one on which I am working [i.e. metaphysics].⁴⁹

Given the above discussion and cited passages, I think the reader would find it extremely difficult not to agree that DM offers undisputed textual evidence for the claim that Descartes is a supporter of the solitude thesis. He certainly holds that the community of metaphysicians is better off epistemically if a metaphysician who produces metaphysical theory (a metaphysician-projector) does not take into serious consideration the ideas of other metaphysicians. The reasons for this are not discussed in much

detail in DM and have a rather simplistic form, but are nevertheless stated quite explicitly: Descartes believes that the reception of ideas from other metaphysicians is both *harmful* and *superfluous* to the metaphysician-projector's effort to produce an epistemically successful metaphysical theory. It is harmful because it distorts and disorients the development of the metaphysical theory, it destroys its unity and simplicity; it is superfluous because the proper application of the right method enables the solitary self to generate a complete and true metaphysical theory. These may not be compelling reasons for the *truth of the solitude thesis*; the present essay, however, is not concerned with this issue – it is concerned only with the truth of the claim that *Descartes is a supporter of the solitude thesis*.

3. The Search for Truth

DM is not the only work of Descartes in which we find explicit support for the solitude thesis. In *The Search for Truth*, an incomplete essay in a dialogue form published posthumously, but being written most probably in 1641, Descartes not only confirms what he wrote in DM, but also provides important new material in support of the solitude thesis. The protagonists are Epistemon, Polyander and Eudoxus – the latter is the mouthpiece for Descartes' own views.⁵⁰

The essay has a short introduction, in which Descartes gives out hints for his support of the solitude thesis. He begins with a theme familiar from DM – he claims that “a good man is not required to have read every book or diligently mastered everything in the Schools;”⁵¹ in fact, he continues, “it would be a kind of defect in his education if he had spent too much time on book-learning.”⁵² The use of one's reason suffices for one being a ‘good man’.⁵³ Although Descartes here refers specifically to the subject of practical, not theoretical, reason, it soon becomes clear that what he says about the ‘good man’ holds (even more) for the metaphysician (the inquirer into metaphysical truth) as well: the use of one's reason suffices for acquiring complete knowledge of metaphysical truth. It is thus important to keep in mind that for Descartes the value of learning, the value of reading and studying the works of others is limited to learning certain concepts' meaning, the clarification in the receiver's mind of what the various words and linguistic symbols mean. Learning (to wit, *receiving* ideas from *others*) does not have the epistemic significance of the learner's receiving true propositions. Only one's own reason (what Descartes calls ‘the natural light’⁵⁴) can determine the truth-value of truth-claims.

Even this kind of learning from others (learning the meaning of certain concepts) is underplayed by Descartes. He later notes that the inquirer can arrive at the truth only if she knows the meaning of such terms as 'existence', 'doubt' and 'thought'.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, neither is this a knowledge we gain exclusively from our peers nor need we follow any 'scientific' method in order to arrive at it.⁵⁶ As metaphysical truth can be *fully* expressed by using terms that have everyday use, any 'moderate intelligence' has already known the meaning of *all* the required terms (but not the truth of the propositions that contain them). If one tries to define these terms 'scientifically' (to wit, in terms of 'the Porphyry tree'), one will make them obscure and thereby unusable.⁵⁷ The terms used in a complete and true metaphysical theory "are very simple and clear" and because of that "they are perceived and known just on their own, and there is no better way of knowing and perceiving them."⁵⁸

In the second paragraph of the introduction Descartes is even more explicit in his support of the solitude thesis:

I shall bring to light the true riches of the soul, opening up to each of us the means whereby we can find within ourselves, *without any help from anyone else*, all the knowledge we may need for the conduct of life, and the means of using it in order to acquire *all the most abstruse items of knowledge that human reason is capable of possessing*.⁵⁹

Two things should be noted here. First, Descartes moves beyond the context of ethics and refers to metaphysical inquiry: He tells us that the essay we are discussing will clarify not only the search for acquiring "the knowledge we may need for the conduct of life," but also the search for acquiring "all the most abstruse items of knowledge that human reason is capable of possessing." The latter phrase undoubtedly signifies the contents of metaphysics. Second, Descartes could not really be more straightforward about the value of the reception of others' truth-claims in both of these inquiries: Each of us, if she follows the right method,⁶⁰ can find within herself the truth *without any help from anyone else*. This demand for solitude, then, holds not only for the discovery of how to be a 'good man' but also for the discovery of fundamental reality (metaphysical truth).

If you recall, in DM Descartes referred to the necessary interconnection between items of metaphysical knowledge as a reason why the ideas of others are superfluous in the process of metaphysical inquiry. Since each of us is in principle fully equipped with rational powers, the application

of the right method will inevitably lead the inquirer to metaphysical truth. But this is itself possible precisely because the elements that are known, the fundamental constituents of reality, are interconnected “by a marvelous bond.”⁶¹ In the third paragraph of the introduction Descartes repeats this idea:

[...] I must tell you that what I am undertaking is not so difficult as one might imagine. For the items of knowledge that lie within reach of the human mind are all linked together by a bond so marvelous, and can be derived from each other by means of inferences so necessary, that their discovery does not require much skill or intelligence – provided we begin with the simplest and know how to move stage by stage to the most sublime.⁶²

Beginning with the simplest, then, and applying the right (Cartesian) method should lead the inquirer to the acquisition of metaphysical truth, precisely because the “items of knowledge,” the elements that become known through this method are in themselves inferentially linked. So, Descartes’ statement that the success of metaphysical inquiry is not owed to one’s ‘special’ intelligence or skills should not come as a surprise, even though it does conflict with our contemporary view of inquiry in general: If the elements of fundamental reality are inferentially interconnected and if the proper application of the rational powers *that in principle each of us has* can indeed disclose the full scope of this interconnected reality, then each and every metaphysician (namely each and every human being that is interested in having knowledge of fundamental reality) should be able to discover metaphysical truth. A certain modesty, humbleness and anti-elitism, then, underlies the Cartesian conception of metaphysical inquiry and Descartes himself appears as a true precursor of the Enlightenment. At the same time, however, this conception goes against our bedrock belief that all inquiry is collective inquiry.

It is in this context that we should understand Descartes’ relation to his readers. He is not teaching metaphysical truth to them; they are not learning the truth from him. He is only describing what he has come to know through the application of the right method and each of his readers must reapply this method in the domain of his or her own case.⁶³ Even the fact that he has come to know the right method does not mean that he is more intelligent than any of his peers, that he has greater rational powers and skills: Indeed, he was the one who discovered this method and not the others, simply because he “accidentally stumbled upon [it].”⁶⁴

In DM Descartes observed that the (standard) procedure⁶⁵ of collecting the insights of various researchers in numerous massive volumes does not have cognitive value and should not be considered an essential part of metaphysical inquiry. He repeats the same here. This procedure, he tells us, is a risky one, as the result cannot be but a “mingle” of truths and falsehoods “scattered haphazardly through such a pile of massive tomes.”⁶⁶ We are expected, Descartes continues, to navigate our way to knowledge by “picking out” the truths from such massive collections of ‘collective’ inquiry.⁶⁷ But, he immediately adds, this is a nonsensical thing to do, since, at least in the domain of metaphysics, we can discover the whole truth purely on our own. This, in fact, would be much more economical in terms of time spent and intelligence exercised, as well as more effective in terms of actually acquiring “knowledge of truth.” The solitary search for truth offers both a more effective and “an easier path.”⁶⁸ It is this persistent belief in the superiority of epistemic solitude that allows him to express a statement that does not ring well to our contemporary ears: “I do *not* wish to consider what *others* have known or not known.”⁶⁹

I have now established that in the introduction to ST Descartes takes a strong stance in favour of the solitude thesis. This support continues in the dialogue that follows. In fact, the dialogue begins with the exact theme of the epistemic value of learning from others. Polyander, who “has never studied at all”⁷⁰ because his parents believed that “the pursuit of learning enfeebles the spirit,”⁷¹ is presented as someone who is eager to receive knowledge from Epistemon (and later from Eudoxus as well), who “has a detailed knowledge of everything that can be learned in the Schools.”⁷² Eudoxus, by contrast, who is “a man of moderate intellect but possessing a judgment which is not corrupted by any false beliefs and a reason which retains all the purity of its nature,”⁷³ enters the scene disagreeing with his interlocutors about the value of learning from *others*: he believes that an “orderly soul” can discover “enough truth” from within herself “to satisfy amply [her] curiosity [for knowledge]”⁷⁴ and that in fact he himself “no longer feel[s] any passion to learn anything at all” because he is “happy with what little knowledge [he has].”⁷⁵ This “little” but “enough” “knowledge of truth” brings Eudoxus to the point of enjoying “the same tranquility as would a king if his country were [...] *isolated and cut off from others.*”⁷⁶ He himself, in fact, has acquired his knowledge when he “retire[d] to [a] remote place.”⁷⁷ Eudoxus, then, is a clear example of a supporter of the solitude thesis.

Epistemon takes up Eudoxus challenge and points out to him what he considers an indisputable fact – that “there are so many things to be known” and that no one can believe “that anyone ever knows so much that he cannot have good reasons to desire to know more.”⁷⁸ As it becomes apparent later, Eudoxus takes Epistemon’s response to imply that the process of knowledge-acquisition must involve the other inquirers as well because the amount of possible knowledge available to one is so huge that it is simply impossible for a human being, who is finite with regards both to her life span and her intellect, to arrive at it solely on her own. Eudoxus “readily grants that one man could not live long enough to acquire first-hand experience of everything in the world,”⁷⁹ and that therefore in this respect the discoveries of others should be allowed to play a role in this ‘never-ending’ process of learning. But he immediately adds that the knowledge he was referring to is not one which rests on experience (which indeed never stops providing us with new data), knowledge of “all the marvels of nature,”⁸⁰ but rather one founded purely on the rational powers of a ‘moderate intelligence’, as these are applied to “the ordinary facts” of reason.⁸¹ Such knowledge exists both in the realm of ethics and in the realm of metaphysics (Polyander refers to such propositions “as those concerning the deity, the rational soul, the virtues and their rewards, etc.”⁸² but Eudoxus adds that it is “about all the things in the world, *considering them as they are in themselves*”),⁸³ is finite in scope and thereby learnable within a life span, and provides the foundation for the possibility of ethical and scientific inquiry in general.⁸⁴

In the remainder of the essay Eudoxus/Descartes proceeds to flesh out his philosophical program in the terms specified. It is a familiar one: it is quite the same as the one carried out in the *Meditations on First Philosophy* and Part I of the *Principles of Philosophy*. As the execution of this program will be the focus of the next section, let us brush it aside for the moment. What is important to note at this point is that throughout the whole discussion of the program *in ST* Descartes reminds us again and again of his support for the solitude thesis – his belief, that is, that the success of the inquiry does not require the involvement of the ideas of others, that the exchange of information with one’s peers has zero epistemic value.

He tells us, for example, that his method is one “which enables someone of average intelligence to discover *for himself* everything that the most subtle minds can devise”⁸⁵ and that “a man with a good mind, *even one brought up in a desert* and never illuminated by any light but the light of nature [i.e. reason], could not have opinions different from

[the one that follows the right method].”⁸⁶ This last extract is an obvious affirmation of the solitude thesis: a man brought up in a “desert” (a symbol of isolation, solitude, remoteness), without receiving information from other metaphysicians, can acquire complete knowledge of metaphysical truth. Even when Epistemon tries very hard to make Eudoxus admit the epistemic value of one’s peers, the latter will have none of it. When the former describes the intellect as “an excellent painter who is called upon to put the finishing touches to a bad picture” painted by others,⁸⁷ Eudoxus immediately objects:

[...] It seems to me that your painter would do far better to make a fresh start on the picture; rather than wasting time in correcting all the lines he finds on the canvas, he should wipe them off with a sponge.⁸⁸

Descartes here repeats what he so powerfully expressed in DM, that the discovery of metaphysical truth requires absolutely no epistemic input from others. All metaphysical truth-claims contained in the mind of the metaphysician-projector must be ‘wiped off with a sponge’ at the beginning of her inquiry: the discovery of metaphysical truth requires a fresh start and a solitary (one is tempted to say ‘hermetic’) road.

That the establishment of the significance of the metaphysician-projector’s epistemic solitude is the real goal of the essay becomes especially apparent when it increasingly acquires a *Meno*-like character. As in Plato’s *Meno*, where an uneducated slave-boy arrives at sophisticated mathematical knowledge (allegedly) all by himself,⁸⁹ so here Eudoxus aspires to show Epistemon that Polyander, a simple, uneducated man, with no knowledge of philosophy or science, can arrive at proven knowledge of the fundamental structure of reality (metaphysical truth) all by himself, with absolutely no epistemic help from others. Eudoxus wraps the essence of the Cartesian attitude to metaphysical inquiry up when he tells Polyander that “all I need do [...] is to leave you to get on with the job on your own, after taking care to set you [methodologically] on your course. [...] All we need for discovering the truth on the most difficult issues [i.e. metaphysical issues] is, I think, common sense [i.e. the rational powers of a ‘moderate’ intelligence].”⁹⁰ Indeed, Eudoxus projects the (unknown to us) ending of the essay by telling us that Polyander will “suddenly and effortlessly end up a learned man” all by himself and without ever “studying or delving into the works of the philosophers.”⁹¹ And the theoretical conclusion from this ‘performance’ is that “when this light [of reason] operates on its own, it is

less liable to go wrong than when it anxiously strives to follow the numerous different rules, the inventions of human ingenuity and idleness, which serve more to corrupt it than render it perfect."⁹² The expression "the inventions of human ingenuity and idleness" signifies nothing but the truth-claims of *others*; thus, the inquirer into metaphysical truth is better off *without* them, as their involvement 'corrupts' rather than 'perfects' her inquiry.

4. *Meditations on First Philosophy*

The two texts we have examined have provided us with affirmative evidence that Descartes is, in at least some of his writings, a supporter of the solitude thesis. Why, then, is there a need to consider a third text? This is so because the objection may be raised that what Descartes declares in theory fails to be materialized in the actual construction of his metaphysics. The claim, that is, is that even though Descartes believes that his metaphysical thought is independent of the ideas of others, his actual metaphysical inquiry shows signs of dependence. In order to respond to this objection one must take a close look at one of Descartes metaphysical works, these being the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (published in 1641) and the *Principles of Philosophy* (published in 1644). In this paper we focus (sketchily) on the first text, which is temporally more adjacent to the texts we have already examined than the second.

Firstly, it should be noted that the very beginning of Descartes' construction of his metaphysics – the very first 'meditation' – functions as an affirmation of the solitude thesis. He emphatically argues for the epistemic need to "demolish everything completely"⁹³ and thereby place himself in a situation of 'being alone'.⁹⁴ This 'loneliness' denotes the *epistemic* distanciation from both all beliefs and those who express them. What remains from this act of epistemic isolation is the pure I; the Other has vanished.

Secondly, the knowledge that initially emerges from the affirmation of the doubting I (the *cogito*) is not the result of an affection from the outside, precisely because the external world (including one's own body) is still in doubt. The determination of the I as a thinking thing and the proof of the existence and nature of God are the result of a priori deliberations. But the same holds for the fundamental universal determinations of all objects in general, such as 'existing', 'being something', 'being extended', 'being temporal', 'being a substance', 'having modes', etc.⁹⁵, which impose their

necessity on the intellect of the inquirer.⁹⁶ It is made clear, then, that, for Descartes, metaphysical inquiry is intimately connected to epistemic solitude, in the sense that metaphysical knowledge progresses from the standpoint of the epistemically isolated I.

Thirdly, and more importantly, Descartes makes reference neither to the Other as a subject that epistemically influences *the I* nor to the Other as a peer of *him* (Descartes). It is evident that Descartes does not simply neglect or ignore the presence of the Other in his metaphysical inquiry; he rather *deliberately* refrains from giving the Other any role to play in the construction of his metaphysics. Whenever a difficulty appears in the rational deduction of the fundamental determinations, Descartes does not look for an idea coming from one of his peers, but rather looks back into his own mind ("I will converse with myself and scrutinize myself more deeply"⁹⁷) and concentrates even more carefully than before ("if one concentrates carefully, all this is quite evident by the natural light"⁹⁸).

Fourthly, it is not only that Descartes does not *refer* to the Other; it is also that, *judged from a neutral standpoint*, the Other makes absolutely no epistemic contribution to the argument of MFP. This holds for the Other conceived both as an epistemic subject and as a peer of Descartes. The latter develops an argument following faithfully the directives of DM and ST: the language he uses is simple and unsophisticated and every argumentative step follows directly from the one that precedes it. Nothing of what Descartes writes requires previous knowledge of any other philosopher in order to be *fully* understood.⁹⁹ Even the criterion he employs in order to establish the truth of metaphysical knowledge, namely clear and distinct perception (the 'natural light'), is evidently conceived in solely personal terms: a metaphysical idea is true if, and only if, it is perceived clearly and distinctly by *the* truth-inquirer, *not* by a *community* of truth-inquirers: "whatever *I* perceive very clearly and distinctly is true."¹⁰⁰ The I, with which the search for metaphysical truth began, never becomes a We. Given these features of Cartesian metaphysical inquiry, features that promote its absolute autonomy, one is intrigued to ask whether the Other *could* offer anything to such an inquiry. The answer seems to be a negative one.

5. Conclusion

The present essay has defended the claim that Descartes is a supporter of the solitude thesis. It has done so by providing and interpreting local

textual evidence in favour of the claim, taken from the *Discourse on the Method*, *The Search for Truth* and the *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Given that the presence of the solitude thesis in the Descartes corpus is not even acknowledged in Descartes scholarship, presenting and interpreting *textual* evidence in its favour is the first thing one should do. The solitude thesis is an extreme methodological position. It does not assert simply that the inquirer into metaphysical truth must be 'critical' of the truth-claims of her peers or that she must judge any such claim with her own 'reason'; it rather asserts much more radically (and, judging with our contemporary standards, counter-intuitively) that the metaphysician-projector should *never* take into serious consideration any of the truth-claims proposed by *other* metaphysicians.

Descartes' ground for so shockingly rejecting the epistemic value of the contributions of others in metaphysics is twofold. On the one hand, such contributions *harm* metaphysical inquiry by hindering the fulfilment of its task, the acquisition of metaphysical truth. This occurs because the epistemic reception of the others' truth-claims destroys the unity of the inquiry by incorporating a plethora of disparate (and often conflicting) ends and concepts into it. This has the immediate consequence that the inquirer (or a community of inquirers) literally loses herself in a forest of myriad conceptual distinctions and spends her whole life trying to find a way out – usually by patching some ideas up and dogmatically rejecting or accepting others. This, of course, reminds us of the situation which more often than not contemporary epistemic communities (in particular scientific and philosophical communities) find themselves in.

On the other hand, the reception of the ideas of others in metaphysics must be rejected because it is *superfluous*. Descartes insists again and again that an inquirer of 'moderate intelligence' can acquire complete knowledge of metaphysical truth all by herself (thus understanding this to be no "divine prerogative"¹⁰¹), as long as she follows the right method. This is possible because such knowledge has a finite interconnected structure that the 'rational powers' of even a non-learned man such as Polyander can inferentially discover. There is, of course, possible knowledge beyond the fundamental structure of reality, knowledge that is endless and contingent. One is obliged to listen to what the others have to say in such a case of possible knowledge (the knowledge of the empirical sciences). But as concerns metaphysical knowledge, knowledge of the fundamental structure of all things, a solitary road suffices (and is recommended) for "knowing everything in the universe."¹⁰²

The only value Descartes ascribes to the ideas of others in the field of metaphysics is that they can illuminate the *meaning* of some of the terms used in metaphysical inquiry (especially those with which the inquiry begins), they can help the inquirer understand better what some concepts mean. But this is no privilege of one's *peers* – in fact, Descartes seems to believe that it is the everyday environment that initially generates and elucidates meanings in the metaphysician's mind. The meaning of the term 'existence', for example, is not known through the application of the Porphyrian tree, but simply by opening one's eyes and hearing people talking to one another. The 'standard' meaning of the basic metaphysical terms will simply appear in the metaphysician's mind through the process of everyday life.¹⁰³ This, however, does not entail that the reception of ideas from others has, strictly speaking, epistemic value, so Descartes; these ideas do not determine what is true and false in a metaphysical theory. Only the application of the right method and one's own reason can do that.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, as seen, the metaphysician is advised *not* to take into consideration the *truth-claims* of others when she searches for the truth.

The details of Descartes' support of the solitude thesis determine the process of *teaching and learning* in the domain of metaphysics. What should be taught is never a collection of metaphysical doctrines, which students are expected to 'choose' from. Learning metaphysics should never be a question of following one or another metaphysical theory. The sole subject matter of teaching must be the right method, and even this ought to be done in a descriptive mode. But Descartes is confident that the properness of his own method will become immediately apparent to the attentive student. As soon as the right method is accepted by the learner, she will soon find out that she is capable of acquiring complete knowledge of the fundamental structure of reality.

The exposition of Descartes' solitude thesis that the present paper has offered will cause unsettling thoughts to many of its readers. The motto 'many people are able to see more than one alone' represents a belief that has permeated our culture and is deeply entrenched in contemporary scientific and philosophical practice. Descartes' case shows that contrary to received opinion such a belief is not a *sine qua non*, a self-evident axiom. And if one succeeds in showing that other major philosophers have also been fervent supporters of the solitude thesis, one is allowed to speak of a thread in the history of Western philosophy that clearly and explicitly favors solitude in metaphysical inquiry.

NOTES

- ¹ See Bala and Goyal (1998: 597): “More information links can increase the probability that a[n] [epistemic] community gets locked into a suboptimal option;” Zollman (2011: 338): “In many cases a[n] [epistemic] community that withholds information from its members is more reliable than one that allows for fully informed individuals;” Zollman (2011: 342): “Communities made up of less-informed scientists might well be more reliable indicators of the truth than communities that are more connected;” Banerjee (1992: 798): “[...] Society may actually be better off by constraining some of the people to use only their own information;” Banerjee (1992: 811): “[...] The economy may be better off if the early decision makers are not allowed to observe the choices made by the other decision makers [...]. In other words, destroying information (in this limited sense), can be socially beneficial.” *All additions in brackets, justified by the original context, are mine; this applies to the whole paper.*
- ² This holds for the following works: Cottingham (1986, 2008a, 2008b), Kemp-Smith (1953), Williams (1978), Curley (1978), Gaukroger (1980, 1989, 1995) and Wilson (1978).
- ³ This, of course, may be so because actually Descartes does not hold such a radical view as the solitude thesis; but it may be the case that no one has hitherto detected this fact. The present paper aspires to provide compelling local evidence in support of the latter possibility.
- ⁴ AT VI 31 / CSM I 126 (my emphasis): “I do not know whether I should tell you of the first meditations that I had there, for they are perhaps too *metaphysical* [...]”; AT VI 38 / CSM I 130 (my emphasis): “[...] Although we have a moral certainty about these things, so that it seems we cannot doubt them without being extravagant, nevertheless when it is a question of *metaphysical* certainty, we cannot reasonably deny that there are adequate grounds for not being entirely sure about them.” See also AT VII 580 and AT VII 574 / CSM II 387 (my emphasis): “But as long as he merely attacked my views on physics or mathematics, I was not too concerned. But in his essay he undertakes to subvert the *metaphysical* principles by means of which I demonstrated the existence of God and the real distinction between the human soul and the body.” It is *only* with respect to metaphysics that Descartes’ method can be characterized as purely *a priori* – this characterization, in other words, does not apply to the method *in general*. When the method has as its subject matter empirical knowledge (e.g. the “nature of the magnet” [AT X 427]), empirical observations and experiments are elements of its structure. Even since the time of the *Regulae* (1619-1628) Descartes had allowed for “two ways of arriving at knowledge of things – through experience and through deduction” (AT X 365 / CSM I 12; see also AT X 368; cf. Hatfield (1988)). Thus, both Koyré (1939), who describes Descartes’ method as being purely

- a priori*, and Clarke (1982), who describes it as being fully empiricist, are off the mark; the Cartesian method, as Alves (2012) correctly points out, is flexible (in his words, 'minimal'), being purely *a priori* only in metaphysics, which is only a *part* of *scientia*. Other scholars who, like Alves, have taken a *via media* on the issue of the character of Descartes' method are Beck (1952), Buchdahl (1969), Garber (1978, 1988, 1998), Williams (1978) and even Gaugroger (1995: 14).
- 5 This variety of foundational knowledge has to do with the fact that for Descartes there are many kinds of *intuition* (*a priori*, mathematical and empirical), which is exactly the element that grounds each and every cognition; see AT X 374, 383.
- 6 AT VI 8-9, 21, 31. Cf. Garber (1998: 239) and Hatfield (1988: 250-251).
- 7 This is made clear in the First Meditation in MFP; see AT VII 17-23.
- 8 It should, however, be noted that the term 'philosophy' is sometimes identified, not with metaphysics, but rather with the whole of *scientia*.
- 9 AT X 504 / CSM II 404. As AT VI 43 makes clear, Descartes conceives of the fundamental determinations of reality as elements that have a presence in all possible worlds.
- 10 AT VI 63, 65.
- 11 AT VI 21 / CSM I 121: "[...] Since I did not restrict the method to any particular subject-matter, I hoped to apply it as usefully to the problems of the other sciences as I had to those of algebra."
- 12 AT VI 2 / CSM I 111: "[...] The power of judging well and of distinguishing the true from the false – which is what we what we properly call 'good sense' or 'reason' – is naturally equal in all men, and consequently [...] the diversity of our opinions does not arise because some of us are more reasonable than others but solely because we direct our thoughts along different paths and do not attend to the same things. For it is not enough to have a good mind; the main thing is to apply it well."
- 13 AT VI 2 / CSM I 112.
- 14 AT VI 2 / CSM I 111, my emphasis.
- 15 The term 'knowledge of truth' is Descartes'; see AT VI 27, 30, 67 and AT VII 597.
- 16 AT VI 3 / CSM I 112, my emphasis.
- 17 Zollman (2010) and Zollman (2011).
- 18 Zollman (2011: 348).
- 19 Cf. AT X 512, 519-520. For a systematic presentation of the Pyrrhonian problematic see Trisokkas (2012: 11-42) and Lammenranta (2008). For an evaluation of Descartes' response to Pyrrhonian scepticism see Westphal (1987).
- 20 AT VI 8 / CSM I 114-115: "Regarding philosophy, I shall say only [that] [...] it has been cultivated for many centuries by the most excellent minds and

yet there is still no point in it which is not disputed and hence doubtful [...]. And, considering how many diverse opinions learned men may maintain on a single question – even though it is impossible for more than one to be true – I held as well-nigh false everything that was merely probable.” The retreat to the solitary self is also present in the *Meditations on First Philosophy* – there, however, the cause for it is located not so much in Descartes’ personal educational experience, but rather in the infamous ‘dreaming argument’ and ‘argument from the evil God’ (AT VII 17-23). It is important to note that independently of the cause of the retreat, such an act entails the termination of the self’s *receiving* truth-claims from other metaphysicians (at least at the beginning of the inquiry).

21 AT VI 4 / CSM I 113; see also AT X 516.

22 AT VI 5 / CSM I 113.

23 The term ‘metaphysical practice’ denotes simply the process of constructing a metaphysical theory (i.e. a theory about the fundamental determinations of being). Metaphysical practice is the activity of the metaphysician-projector.
24 AT VI 8-9, 21.

25 See especially AT VI 63 / CSM I 143: “[...] By building upon the work of our predecessors and combining the lives and labours of many, we might make much greater progress [in the science or knowledge of nature] working together than anyone could make on his own.” See also AT VI 65 / CSM I 144: “[...] The advances I make in the knowledge of nature will depend henceforth on the opportunities I get to make more or fewer [...] observations. [...] This would oblige all who desire the general well-being of mankind [...] both to communicate to me the observations they have already made and to assist me in seeking those which remain to be made.”

26 AT VI 18 / CSM I 120, my emphasis.

27 This, according to Descartes himself, holds even for the first and the last stage: “[...] I take my reasonings to be so closely interconnected that just as the last are proved by the first, which are their causes, so the first are proved by the last, which are their effects” (AT VI 76 / CSM I 150). See also AT X 526-527 / CSM II 419-420: “[...] All truths follow logically from one another and are mutually interconnected;” and AT VII 577. This reminds us the well-known passage from Hegel’s *Science of Logic* (WdL I 70 / SL 71): “[...] The whole of science [Hegel here means ‘metaphysics’ (I.T.)] forms within itself a circle, wherein the first becomes the last and the last the first.”

28 AT VI 19 / CSM I 120. As Larivière (2009: 483) notes, this feature of the Cartesian method was in line with the tradition: “Descartes’s notion of science is as deductive as its traditional predecessor. [...] Indeed, the model in the *Discourse* is geometrical or mathematical demonstration: systematic deduction from primitively true propositions.”

- 29 AT VI 19; AT VI 20-21 / CSM I 121: “[...] beginning with the simplest and most general and using each truth I found as a rule for finding further truths [...].”
- 30 Cf. Houlgate (2006: 31): “The path of ‘universal doubt’ that leads into Hegel’s science of logic is clearly very similar to that taken by Descartes. Hegel’s conclusion, however, is not ‘I think, therefore I am’ but rather ‘thinking, therefore *is*’. From this pure being of thought, Hegel believes, the necessary categories of thought have to be derived.” See also Houlgate (2005: 30).
- 31 AT VI 2.
- 32 AT VI 21 / CSM I 121.
- 33 AT VI 9 / CSM I 115, my emphasis. See also AT VI 42 / CSM I 132: “[...] I wished to be free to say what I thought about [these matters] without having either to follow or to refute the accepted opinions of the learned.”
- 34 AT VI 9 / CSM I 115.
- 35 AT VI 11 / CSM I 116, my emphasis.
- 36 AT VI 31 / CSM I 126, my emphasis.
- 37 AT VI 11 / CSM I 116.
- 38 AT VI 11 / CSM I 116; see also AT X 509 / CSM II 407.
- 39 AT VI 11 / CSM I 116.
- 40 AT VI 12 / CSM I 117.
- 41 AT VI 12 / CSM I 116.
- 42 AT VI 12 / CSM I 117, my emphasis.
- 43 AT VI 16 / CSM I 119.
- 44 AT VI 68 / CSM I 146, my emphasis.
- 45 Cf. AT VII 578-579.
- 46 AT VI 68-69 / CSM I 146 (my emphasis); see also AT VII 575 and AT VII 578 / CSM II 390 (my emphasis): “[...] Their hope is that the truth will be discovered, since most of them are convinced that it will eventually emerge out of all these debates and arguments. And *even if long experience has taught them that the truth is rarely discovered in this way*, their zeal for the truth is such that they think that even the smallest hope of discovering it should not be neglected.”
- 47 AT VI 73 / CSM I 148.
- 48 AT VI 69 / CSM I 146.
- 49 AT VI 72 / CSM I 148.
- 50 CSM II 399.
- 51 AT X 495 / CSM II 400.
- 52 AT X 495 / CSM II 400.
- 53 AT X 495-496 / CSM II 400.
- 54 For an attempt to determine what Descartes precisely means with the term ‘natural light’ see the excellent paper by Morris (1973). Cf. AT VII 598 / CSM II 394: “[...] In philosophy I deal only with matters that are known

- very clearly by natural reason [...];” and AT VII 38 / CSM II 27: “Whatever is revealed to me by the natural light [...] cannot in any way be open to doubt.”
- 55 AT X 523-524.
- 56 AT X 523-524.
- 57 AT X 523-524; see also AT X 522 / CSM II 418: “There is no need here for a definition, which would confuse rather than clarify the issue.”
- 58 AT X 523-524 / CSM II 417.
- 59 AT X 496 / CSM II 400.
- 60 AT X 497.
- 61 See the passage below.
- 62 AT X 496-497 / CSM II 400-401; see also AT VII 579 / CSM II 391: “What has perhaps helped me is that I have no great confidence in my own intelligence, and so I have followed only those paths that are easy and straightforward. It is hardly surprising that, by keeping to such simple routes, a person can make more progress than others of greatly superior intelligence, who follow rugged and impenetrable pathways.”
- 63 See especially AT X 525 / CSM II 419: “It was never my intention to prescribe to anyone the method which he should follow in his search for truth, but simply to describe the method which I used myself: if it should be thought to be defective, it would be rejected; if good and useful, others would use it too.” See also AT VI 4.
- 64 AT X 497 / CSM II 401.
- 65 See Brockliss (1995: 5): “[...] Early seventeenth-century professors of philosophy were [...] concerned first of all about the mechanics of organizing and relaying an authoritative body of knowledge.” See the whole paper for further discussion.
- 66 AT X 497-498 / CSM II 401.
- 67 AT X 498 / CSM II 401.
- 68 AT X 498 / CSM II 401.
- 69 AT X 497 / CSM II 401.
- 70 AT X 499 / CSM II 401.
- 71 AT X 499 / CSM II 402.
- 72 AT X 499 / CSM II 401.
- 73 AT X 498 / CSM II 401.
- 74 AT X 500 / CSM II 401.
- 75 AT X 501 / CSM II 402.
- 76 AT X 501 / CSM II 402.
- 77 AT X 501 / CSM II 403.
- 78 AT X 500 / CSM II 402.
- 79 AT X 502 / CSM II 403.
- 80 AT X 503 / CSM II 404.

- 81 AT X 503 / CSM II 404.
- 82 AT X 504 / CSM II 404; see also AT X 510.
- 83 AT X 504 / CSM II 404; see also AT X 515 / CSM II 409: “[...] From this universal doubt, as from a fixed and immovable point, I propose to derive the knowledge of God, of yourself, and of everything in the universe.”
- 84 AT X 503-504.
- 85 AT X 506 / CSM II 405.
- 86 AT X 506 / CSM II 405.
- 87 AT X 507-508 / CSM II 406.
- 88 AT X 508 / CSM II 406.
- 89 Plato, *Meno* 82a-86a. The ‘slave-experiment’ is Plato’s proof of his claim that all mathematical and metaphysical knowledge is recollection. Descartes comes very close to Plato’s view on AT VII 64 / MFP 44: “And the truth of these matters is so open and so much in harmony with my nature, that on first discovering them it seems that I am not so much learning something new as remembering what I knew before [...].”
- 90 AT X 518 / CSM II 412.
- 91 AT X 519 / CSM II 413.
- 92 AT X 521 / CSM II 415.
- 93 AT VII 17 / CSM II 12.
- 94 AT VII 18.
- 95 This is made particularly clear by the conclusion of ‘the wax example’(AT VII 31 / CSM II 21): “I must therefore admit that the nature of this piece of wax is in no way revealed by my imagination, but is perceived by the mind alone. [...] The perception I have of it is a case not of vision or touch or imagination – nor has it ever been, despite previous appearances – but of purely mental scrutiny [...]”; see also AT VII 34 / CSM II 22: “I now know that even bodies are not strictly perceived by the senses or the faculty of imagination but by the intellect alone, and that this perception derives not from their being touched or seen but from their being understood [...].” For more items on the list see AT VII 43, 45, 65.
- 96 AT VII 67.
- 97 AT VII 34 / CSM II 24; see also AT VI 56 / CSM II 39: “Next, when I look more closely into myself [...].”
- 98 AT VII 47 / CSM II 32. See also: AT VII 42 / CSM II 29: “The longer and more carefully I examine these points, the more clearly and distinctly I recognize their truth;” AT VII 55 / CSM II 38: “As I reflect on these matters more attentively, [...]”; AT VII 68 / CSM II 47: “Some of the things I clearly and distinctly perceive are obvious to everyone, while others are discovered only by those who look more closely and investigate more carefully [...].” On this process of personal reflection as a process of justification see the brilliant essay by Beysade (2008).

- ⁹⁹ Even the scholastic distinction between the objective and the formal reality of ideas, which Descartes makes use of in the Third Meditation, does not signal the presence of the Other; this is so because Descartes explains the distinction fully and simply and in the context of his current personal discussion ('meditation') alone. Moreover, Descartes explicitly declares that the distinction "is manifest by the natural light" (AT VII 40 / CSM II 28). In other words, a man of moderate intelligence could discover the distinction purely by himself, without heeding the words of an Other. The same holds for the other principles that Descartes employs in his argument, such as the principle that "something cannot arise from nothing" (AT VII 40 / CSM II 28) and the principle that "what is more perfect cannot arise from what is less perfect" (AT VII 40-41 / CSM II 28), both of which are "transparently true" (AT VII 41 / CSM II 28) and "clear to me by the natural light" (AT VII 42 / CSM II 29).
- ¹⁰⁰ AT VII 35 / CSM II 24 (my emphasis); see also AT VII 70 / CSM II 48 (my emphasis): "[...] I am incapable of error in those cases where *my* understanding is transparently clear."
- ¹⁰¹ Glouberman (2011: 877).
- ¹⁰² AT X 515 / CSM II 409. It is sometimes the case that in his replies to his contemporaries' comments on his metaphysics or in his letters to prominent figures of his time Descartes explicitly asks for their critical opinion and advice – an attitude that does not square with the demands of the solitude thesis. Nevertheless, in all these cases the continuation of Descartes' prose makes it clear that he makes such a statement only out of courtesy. Take, for example, the *Letter to Father Dinet*. Descartes begins by making a statement that obviously undermines the solitude thesis (AT VII 564 / CSM II 384: "[...] My dearest wish is to test the certainty of my opinions by having them examined by distinguished men, in the hope that they will be unable to discover any element of falsity in them; and failing that, my next wish is to be advised of my mistakes so that I can put them right." But he then goes on to make claims that unambiguously contradict this statement. He tells us that his metaphysical arguments in DM "possessed incontrovertible certainty" (AT VII 575 / CSM II 388), that the publication of his philosophy signals the uncovering of truth (AT VII 575 / CSM II 388), that "although many people have [...] tried to refute [his writings] by every possible means, no one [...] has been able to find in them anything that is not true" (AT VII 579 / CSM II 391), that he proved that his metaphysical beliefs are true (AT VII 582 / CSM II 392), that it is clearly perceived that his metaphysical beliefs are true (AT VII 582 / CSM II 392) and, finally, that "if [he] were to be frank," he has no doubts about the truth of his metaphysics (AT VII 603 / CSM II 397).
- ¹⁰³ Descartes believed that the basic concepts of metaphysics are "naturally implanted in the human mind" (AT VII 580 / CSM II 392), that they are

"innate" (AT VII 37 / MFP 26, AT VII 51 / MFP 35); cf. Voltaire (1733: 63): "[Descartes] maintained [...] that the soul comes into the body already endowed with all the metaphysical notions, knowing God, space, the infinite, having every abstract idea, in short full of learning, which it unfortunately forgets on leaving its mother's womb."

¹⁰⁴ See AT VI 77 / CSM I 150: "I do not boast of being the first to discover [these ideas], but I do claim to have accepted them not because they have, or have not, been expressed by others, but solely because reason has convinced me of them."

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ABBREVIATIONS

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- CSM: COTTINGHAM, J., STOOTHOF, R. and MURDOCH, D. (eds.), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vols. I-II, CUP, Cambridge, 1984-5
- SL: HEGEL, G. W. F., *Science of Logic*, tr. A. V. Miller, Humanity Books, Amherst, New York, 1999
- WdL I: HEGEL, G. W. F., *Wissenschaft der Logik I*, ed. E. Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M., 1986

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