

Solus Secedo and Sapere Aude: Cartesian Meditation as Kantian Enlightenment

Solus Secedo y Sapere Aude: La meditación cartesiana como Ilustración kantiana

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Abstract

Recently Samuel Fleischacker has developed Kant's model of enlightenment as a "minimalist enlightenment" in the tradition of a relatively thin proceduralism focused on the form of public debate and interaction. I want to discuss the possibility that such a minimalism, endorsed by Fleischacker, Habermas, Rawls, and others, benefits from a metaphysics of critical individual subjectivity as a prerequisite for the social proceduralism of the minimalist enlightenment. I argue that Kant's enlightenment, metaphysically thicker than much contemporary proceduralism, constitutes a recovery and transformation of a subjective interiority deeply Cartesian in spirit and central to the *reciprocity* of the community of subjects in *What is Enlightenment*. This opens a space for a site of resistance to the social. Descartes' *solus secedo* describes the analogical space of such a resistance for Kant's *sapere aude*. The *Meditations* thus point forward implicitly to how a rational subject might achieve critical distance from tradition in its various forms, epistemic, ethical, moral, and political.

Key words

Kant; Descartes; Enlightenment; Subject, Individual, Critical, Space, Reason, *What is Enlightenment*; *Meditations*

Resumen

Samuel Fleischacker ha desarrollado recientemente el modelo kantiano de Ilustración como una "Ilustración minimalista", en la tradición de un procedimentalismo relativamente débil condensado en la forma del debate e interacción públicos. Pretendo discutir la posibilidad de que tal

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minimalismo, sostenido por Fleischacker, Habermas, Rawls y otros, dependa de una metafísica de la subjetividad individual crítica como prerequisite para el procedimentalismo social de la Ilustración minimalista. Discuto que la Ilustración de Kant, metafísicamente más densa que la mayor parte del procedimentalismo contemporáneo, constituye una recuperación y transformación de una interioridad subjetiva profundamente cartesiana en espíritu y central para la *reciprocidad* de la comunidad de los sujetos en *¿Qué es Ilustración?* Esto abre paso a un espacio de resistencia a lo social. El *solus secedo* de Descartes describe un espacio de semejante resistencia análogo al del *sapere aude* de Kant. Las *Meditaciones* señalan así de manera implícita el modo en que un sujeto racional podría ganar distancia con respecto a la tradición en sus múltiples formas: epistémica, ética, moral y política.

Palabras clave

Kant; Descartes; Ilustración; sujeto; individuo; crítico; espacio; razón; *¿Qué es Ilustración?*; *Meditaciones*

1. Introduction: The metaphysics of minimalist Enlightenment

Recently Samuel Fleischacker has interpreted and developed Kant's model of enlightenment as a "minimalist enlightenment" in the tradition of a relatively thin proceduralism, one which focuses on the form of public debate and interaction rather than on any specific content of enlightened ideas, such as individual freedoms or scientific ideas.¹ I want to discuss the possibility that such a minimalism, endorsed by Fleischacker, Habermas, Rawls, and others, benefits from a metaphysics of subjectivity which emphasizes individuality over the socially inflected account of minimalist proceduralism. I will argue further that such individuality is a prerequisite for the social proceduralism of the minimalist enlightenment. At first glance the virtues of minimalism per se are clear and distinct: with emphasis on actual conversation and its rules and procedures, we get to a community of actual conversation with different points of view and cultures and actually different subjects² who interact with each other—an attractive picture of living reciprocity on, say, a Habermasian model. However, I will argue that the virtues of a concrete community and its need for a minimalist and thin enlightenment may, without certain constraints, endanger a different aspect of being enlightened, the individual subject's ability to distance him or herself from an actual community so as to bring a critical voice to it. This danger is already evident in the historical context of Descartes' *Meditations*, given such seventeenth century events as the trial and condemnation of Galileo.³ With this and

¹ Unless such specific items turn out to be prerequisites for public debate. As Fleischacker makes clear, one could, on such a procedural definition have, for example, robust religious beliefs, and, presumably possible skepticism about the scope of science.

² I say "actually" to distinguish actual embodied human subjects who differ in many empirical ways from, say, the different interlocutors who occupy Descartes' Meditator's internal conversation or even the different perspectives a Kantian subject might consider while debating the validity of his or her maxims.

³ Another example would be the trial of Socrates. Presumably the cosmopolitan community of the minimalist enlightenment would be, in its nature, immune to the problems surrounding such events but this is precisely because a Cartesian synthesis, I will argue, both enacts and grounds the fundamental structure of an

other such historical contexts in mind, I will argue further that Kant's enlightenment, metaphysically thicker than most contemporary proceduralism, constitutes a recovery and transformation of a subjective interiority which is deeply Cartesian in spirit. Such a reflective and critical subjectivity is no unfortunate early modern remnant in Kant but is central to one side of the reciprocity of the community of subjects in *What is Enlightenment*, namely, the side of the critical individual subject who uses his or her own understanding.⁴ I will argue that ethical and political subjectivity for Kant involves achieving both some distance from actual empirical community and an effectively Cartesian turn to the self, though Kant's transcendental model more *explicitly* defines that distance⁵ as being in reflection rather than empirical reality.⁶

This should still be good news for the supporters of the minimalist enlightenment as Kant's goal is the maintenance of the same autonomy and critical stance which the minimalist enlightenment also supports; what may be more difficult to accept is that Kant's emphasis on a kind of isolation for the subject (though balanced by the public nature of reason) is not a moral or ethical narcissism but in fact an attempt to define humanity through its ability to be a site of resistance to the social. Descartes' quasi-aesthetic and

enlightened community, whether minimalist or not. The cosmopolitan community requires and makes *explicit* a space of enquiry: what we see in the *Meditations* is that such a space is Cartesian, requiring some trench work in metaphysics, the kind of work Descartes does in both creating this space artificially and then moving from it to things external to the enquirer (in Descartes' case, God and the material external world). My thanks to Joël Madore for drawing my attention to the question of the cosmopolitan community and why it needs the Cartesian synthesis.

⁴ The other side, the delicate relation to others, is reflected in the three-fold version of enlightenment in the *Critique of Judgment*, in section 40's discussion of the *sensus communis*. This larger aspect of enlightenment, a *community* of subjects, ideally self-critical and autonomous but actually and empirically probably not, needs to be addressed in the light of the complexity of Kant's account of the living moral subject of the WIE and its possible conceptual relationship to Descartes' own account of how to deal with a concrete community as a rational subject. Since the Meditator has so much more freedom from institutional constraint than Kant's enlightened subject, the relationship between Descartes and Kant on this point is bound to be more vexed.

⁵ Descartes *implicitly* defines that distance as reflection in the artificiality of the *solus secedo*. This fits in with Jean-Luc Marion's claims that the *Meditations*, both in its conception as a work and in its structure, is "responsorial". (Marion 2007, pp.38-41) My discussion is focused more on the solitude aspect of enlightenment but I agree with Marion's important point that such a responsorial nature means that the *Meditations* as a project is not "soliloquy or solipsism". (Marion 2007, p.41) See Henry Allison's 2012 discussion of the need for all three maxims of true enlightenment, which combine publicity and thinking for oneself.

⁶ Katerina Deligiorgi cogently argues that Kant's enlightenment is grounded in a publicity which seems to leave a more Cartesian emphasis on correct method in using reason aside, while sharing Descartes' egalitarian commitment to the capacity of each person to engage in enlightened reasoning. (Deligiorgi 2005, p.62) In fact, according to her the Kantian "culture of enlightenment" undermines the Cartesian certainty of foundationalism in favour of a more dynamic approach. (Deligiorgi 2006, p.6) This seems entirely in line with a minimalist enlightenment and also, in my view, a legitimate difference to draw between Descartes and Kant. However, the legitimacy of this distinction seems not to rule out a connection between Cartesian *method*, particularly the issue of isolation, and Kantian publicity. This is especially true because, as Deligiorgi points out, what does the "heavy lifting" in Kant's emphasis on free communication, is the freedom to communicate things which are *different* from the empirical community or culture around one, the freedom to *challenge*. (Deligiorgi 2006, p.8) This is where the legacy of Cartesian method shows itself, even where Kant differs in actual claims about community or, more importantly, in his transcendental approach to the question of the self and its relation to others. See also Marion's point, mentioned in the note above, about the "responsorial" function of the *Meditations*.

definitely imaginative empirical separation of self and social sketches a seventeenth century analogue for the transcendental reconceptualization of moral agency and of the self which is the eighteenth century basis for Kantian enlightenment. *Solus secedo*, the Cartesian assertion of an isolated space of epistemological investigation, describes the space of resistance to the social, the space of Kant's *sapere aude*.

I will begin by looking at the general context of Kant's "court of reason" and how this general notion of enlightenment is developed in four of the criteria for enlightenment spelled out in *What is Enlightenment* (WIE).⁷ I will then turn to a discussion of Meditations One and Two in order to show that these criteria are also articulated by Descartes in an epistemological context. I will argue that the project of the *Meditations*, as developed in Meditations One and Two, show the actual workings of epistemic enlightenment⁸ and thus point forward implicitly⁹ to how a rational subject might achieve critical distance from tradition in its various forms, epistemic, ethical, moral, and political.

2. The Metaphysics of Kant's Morals: The court of reason in the *Critique of Pure Reason*

What Kant takes to be the issue of metaphysics is set out in the A edition of the Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, in 1781, three years earlier than WIE. Human reason inevitably asks questions which we are incapable of answering, such as Does God exist? Am I free? Kant eventually sketches out what must be done to solve the problem of the claims of metaphysics. First he shifts from what looks like a bemoaning of scepticism and indifferentism to saying that, in fact, the questioning of the claims of metaphysics is the result:

«not of the thoughtlessness of our age, but of its ripened **power of judgment**, which will no longer be put off with illusory knowledge, and which demands that reason should take

⁷ These are only four of the more "metaphysical" criteria. There are others which I will not address in detail here, though further discussion of these will eventually be necessary in a fuller account of the relationship between Kant and Descartes.

⁸ For the sake of simplicity I refer to "epistemic enlightenment" in Descartes as contrasted with the more clearly ethical, moral, and political enlightenment in Kant. However, the point of this essay is that the latter builds on the former. I also use "epistemic" since it is not clear, especially in Descartes and even in Kant, how much enlightenment requires a metaphysical or ontological rejection of tradition. In Descartes, for example, there is no rejection of God or the soul or immortality or even of religion; there is merely the thinking through of why I should accept these rationally. They pass the test, for Descartes, in the court of reason, where for Kant, given transcendental idealism, the results are not clear cut, for, say, God.

⁹ The same epistemic enlightenment and its ethical trajectory is displayed much more *explicitly* in Descartes' earlier work, the *Discourse on the Method*, especially Parts I and II, with Part III the equivalent, in effect, of Kant's distinction between the public and the private use of reason. Descartes' autobiographical Part I shows him leaving his minority; Part IV shows the results of this in the "Je pense". This "I think" can be fruitfully glossed, in Kantian terms, as "I think for myself, therefore I am", as Scott Johnston has suggested to me in conversation. However, discussing the details and implications of such a gloss in the text of the *Discourse* is beyond the scope of the current essay, though a crucial stage in recovering the extent of Descartes being an "enlightener." In this discussion I intend only to show that the enlightenment point is definitely there in the text of Meditations One and Two, including the *sum, existo* of the Meditation Two *cogito*.

on anew the most difficult of all its tasks, namely, that of self-knowledge, and to institute a court of justice, by which reason may secure its rightful claims while dismissing all its groundless pretensions, and this not by mere decrees but according to its own eternal and unchangeable laws; and this court is none other than the **critique of pure reason** itself». (A xi-xii, GW 100-101)

In a well-known footnote he explains further what such a court would be and what it would accomplish:

«Our age is the genuine age of **criticism**, to which everything must submit. **Religion** through its **holiness** and **legislation** through its **majesty** commonly seek to exempt themselves from it. But in this way they excite a just suspicion against themselves, and cannot lay claim to that unfeigned respect that reason grants only to that which has been able to withstand its free and public examination». (A xii, GW 100-101)

No “free and public examination” hence no accountability—thus no genuine respect.¹⁰ Given that this is only three years earlier than WIE, we can probably assume that ‘public’ here means what it does in WIE, the public of reasonable discussion, of literate discussion, of the public use of reason. It may be reasonable to assume also that the opposite would be the world of the private¹¹, trammled with vested interest, behind closed doors, fettered with private desires and relations of power, in which one would be subordinated as a part to a whole through artistic unity but not organic reciprocal unity. In such a context there could be no interrogation of authority through which it would be required to justify its actions. In the end, Kant’s solution will involve a delicate balancing of private and public, one in which he will call upon an ideal ruler to allow the public use of reason. The starting point, however, is the untrammled, unfettered, independent reason of the adult citizen, a reason which has emancipated itself initially from the weight of tradition, even if eventually to recover and critically discuss such tradition, properly justified in its claims, if they can be so justified, in the court of reason. One important condition for such an emancipation, the ability to be “quite alone” as a thinking subject in some sense¹², is presented to us in the project of the *Meditations*. As we will see eventually¹³, the marks of enlightenment are the marks of the Cartesian project.

¹⁰ Note that this respect is *unverstellte*, genuine, unfeigned, hence, one can assume, uncoerced or free.

¹¹ I say the “private” rather than the “secretive” because there is nothing necessarily secret about the private interests governing an individual who is subject to them in society, in fact. Kant makes it clear in WIE that his notion of “public” involves the public of educated readers who ought to be free to engage in debate. In *Perpetual Peace* and elsewhere this notion of public expands to one involving politics as well, something already implicit in the WIE, especially in the latter part’s discussion of educating the people to be good citizens.

¹² Of course Kant and Descartes have, *prima facie*, striking differences about first person subjectivity and many of these differences are relevant to a full discussion of Descartes and Kant on enlightenment. Kant’s discussion in the Refutation of Idealism and the Paralogisms indicate many of these differences. A full discussion would need to address such differences in detail; all I seek to do here is sketch some of the possible connections between these two thinkers of enlightenment, particularly in the kind of “space” indicated by Descartes as necessary for independent thinking. Kant’s transcendental turn of course radically redefines this space just as he redefines the place of theoretical and practical reason, but the space of solitary

3. Marks of Enlightenment

In *What is Enlightenment?* Kant expounds a principle fundamental to his practical philosophy, the principle of thinking for oneself. He opens with:

«*Enlightenment is the human being's emergence from his self-incurred minority. Minority is inability to make use of one's own understanding without direction from another. This minority is self-incurred when its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapere aude! Have the courage to make use of your own understanding! is thus the motto of enlightenment*». ¹⁴
(AA 8:35, Gregor 17)

The two stresses on “one’s own understanding” are instructive here because in the first instance one is indeed using one’s *own* understanding but in the leading-strings of someone else’s direction, a book, a spiritual or medical advisor, or others. Once one embarks on the process of enlightenment, one begins to make use of one’s own understanding again, but this time *independently* of another’s direction.

Kant spells this out in the rest of the essay, including his famous and perhaps notorious distinction between the enlightened public use of reason and the less autonomous (and necessarily so) private use of reason, when one has a job or a function. In the latter cases one is bound, as a part, to the direction of the whole; but merely as someone who thinks, one has freedom in the public use of one’s reason, a freedom a monarch or governing power should not restrict. As Kant eventually explicates it, the binding nature of private reason makes one a cog in a machine, in a sense, while the freedom of the public use of reason, properly used, allows one to avoid complete reduction to such mechanism, while allowing a limited amount of such mechanical existence.

There are four explicit criteria for enlightenment, which Kant articulates all of which link autonomy and being non-mechanical¹⁵, not a machine, as he explicitly states in several differences places in the essay. The first is where Kant is referring to those who would like to make human beings essentially non-autonomous:

thinking needed to be laid out first by Descartes (and Rousseau, according to Deligiorgi—and possibly Augustine, in a sense) before itself being critically transformed.

¹³ In sections 4 and 5 of this essay.

¹⁴ All references to *What is Enlightenment* and the *Critique of Practical Reason* are from Gregor’s translations in Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, and are cited in the text with the Akademie pagination and the pages in Gregor. References to the German text of the *Critique of Practical Reason* are to the *Akademie Textausgabe in Kants Werke*, Vol.V; references to the German text of WIE are to the *Akademie Textausgabe in Kants Werke*, Vol. VIII.

¹⁵ In the *Critique of Practical Reason* and in the *Critique of Judgment*, works later than WIE, Kant gives us a detailed account of mechanism that links both his theoretical and practical uses of the term and thus helps to shed some light on the use of machine language in WIE. The second Critique highlights the independence of thinking that makes a moral subject non-machine like while the third Critique emphasizes the reciprocity and interaction which characterize non-machines, specifically, biological organisms. I have addressed both these discussions of mechanism elsewhere in some detail.

«...those guardians who have kindly taken it upon themselves to supervise them; after they have made their domesticated animals dumb and carefully prevented these placid creatures from daring to take a single step without the walking cart [*Gängelwagen*] in which they have confined them, they then show them the danger that threatens them if they try to walk alone». (AA 8:35, Gregor 17)

The “walking cart” Kant has in mind is revealed in the next paragraph where he refers to “Precepts and formulas, those *mechanical* instruments of a rational use, or rather misuse, of his [anyone’s] natural endowments, are the ball and chain of an everlasting minority.” (AA 8:36, Gregor 17, emphasis added) Extrapolating from these two references, we can say that these are akin to the rules or concepts Kant refers to in the first *Critique*, when he discusses the difficulty of judgment as subsuming correctly under a rule: such subsumption, not at all identical with knowing the rules or concepts, is difficult to learn and almost impossible to teach, since it is essentially the art of having judgment. One can have all the rules in the world without being able to apply them.

Generally Kant has nothing against rules at all; in fact, the hallmark of well-formed judgment is to use rules, either theoretically or practically. The point, as we will see, is not to use them *mechanically* which in the WIE discussion means using them unreflectively, on the say-so of someone else, or on the say-so of some putative authority; in other words, the problem is not necessarily the rules as such, but the issue of whether they are self-imposed or imposed by another¹⁶ If it is right then the gods will say so, but it is not right *because* the gods say so.

A third reference to the activity of the citizen comes once Kant has made a transition from the possible enlightenment of individuals to the more probable enlightenment of the public at large, provided they are allowed freedom in the public use of reason:

«Now, for many affairs conducted in the interest of a commonwealth a certain *mechanism* is necessary, by means of which some members of the commonwealth must behave merely passively, so as to be directed by the government, though an artful unanimity (*künstliche Einhelligkeit*), to public ends... Here it is, certainly, impermissible to argue; instead, one must obey. But insofar as this part of the *machine* also regards himself as a member of a whole commonwealth, even of the society of citizens of the world, and so in his capacity of a scholar who by his writings addresses a public in the proper sense of the word, he can certainly argue without thereby harming the affairs assigned to him in part as a passive member». (AA 8:37, Gregor 18, emphasis added)

For example, says Kant, one cannot refuse to pay taxes as a citizen but “the same citizen does not act against the duty of a citizen when, as a scholar, he publicly expresses his

¹⁶ My thanks to Joël Madore for this point.

thoughts about the inappropriateness or even injustice of such decrees”¹⁷. (AA 8:37-38, Gregor 19) In giving us an account of the balance between public and private uses of reason, Kant also lays out what it means to be mechanical. Precepts and formulas certainly play a role but now mechanism is also revealed as necessary for many aspects even of a commonwealth¹⁸ and it consists in accepting that one is a passive part of a machine, a part whose unity with the whole is simply artful (*künstliche*) or constructed.¹⁹

There are several other references which can be connected to passivity and mechanism but the one we will conclude with is at the end of WIE. After teleologically analyzing the development of human beings to the point where, as people they are capable of being free, Kant says that the tendency and vocation of thinking freely “gradually works back upon the mentality of the people (which thereby gradually becomes capable of *freedom* in acting²⁰) and eventually even upon the principles of *government*, which finds it profitable to itself to treat the human being, *who is now more than a machine*, in keeping with his dignity.” (AA 8:41-42, Gregor 22). Kant is clearly connecting the capacity to be free in one’s actions with being more than a machine and connecting this “moreness” with human dignity, which he will later make the hallmark of being a human being in the *Groundwork*, even if he over-optimistically sees this as profitable to government.

Thus, WIE indicates that being mechanically unenlightened involves over-reliance on precepts and formulas and other kinds of rote learning, fundamental and perpetual direction from others, being a passive part rather than an active member,²¹ and thus lacking dignity and being treated as a virtual child if not an actual one. As we will see, all four points are addressed by Descartes’ Meditator²², both in the content of Meditations One and Two and in the very formulation of the project.

¹⁷ There is, of course, the question of whether such obeying in action and being critical in speech is a sufficient or acceptable *political* move. Kant famously is more supportive after the fact of things, like revolution, that he beforehand would not endorse, and in the case of revolution, actually condemns. See Ripstein (2009) for a lengthy discussion of the relationship between Kant’s political theory and his theory of freedom, especially chapter 11 which deals with the thorny issue of revolution.

¹⁸ I say “even” because the image of the commonwealth most favourably expressed by Kant is that of an organic body, where, of course, the parts and the whole enjoy a *reciprocal* relationship rather than a top-down relationship. See the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, sect.59, (AA5: 352). Given Kant’s comments in this section, the mechanism of state is the body to its “soul,” which would be its “life,” The reciprocal unity of citizens and rulers/governments.

¹⁹ This point about the “artful” is significant when Kant denies in teleological judgment that organic life can be regarded as an artwork in which parts are subordinated to the whole. See the second half of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, especially the discussion of the Analytic (AA 5: 359-383).

²⁰ Earlier in the discussion Kant says that people move in this direction normally if not actively prevented from so doing. See AA 8:41, Gregor 21.

²¹ The issue of passivity probably comes out of Kant’s reading of Rousseau. Certainly elements of his linking life with freedom and organisms analogously with proper commonwealths comes out of Rousseau’s distinction between an aggregate and an association and the resulting notion of the general will. However, see Deligiorgi for a discussion of important *differences* from Rousseau in this context.

²² Aryeh Kosman (1986) has a well known discussion in which Descartes and the Meditator are importantly distinct. For one thing, Descartes knows how the project finishes, while the Meditator, speaking in the present tense, does not. A similar point has been developed more recently by Charles Larmore (2006), who points out that the Meditator’s attitudes reflect a more traditional semi-Aristotelian view which Descartes himself would not have held. Larmore thus reads the Meditations as almost a dialogue (which in form it

4. Descartes' project of critical reflection

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer critically comments on Descartes' role in the enlightenment issue of authority²³ versus individual reason:

«Enlightenment's distinction between faith in authority and using one's own reason is, in itself, legitimate. If the prestige of authority displaces one's own judgment, then authority is in fact a source of prejudices. But this does not preclude its being a source of truth, and that is what the Enlightenment failed to see when it denigrated all authority. To be convinced of this, we need only consider one of the greatest forerunners of the European Enlightenment, namely Descartes....». (Gadamer 2006, p.280)²⁴

Gadamer goes on to point out a central feature of authority radically distorted by Enlightenment thinking, thus presumably by Descartes as well:

«...the authority of persons is ultimately based not on the subjection and abdication of reason but on an act of acknowledgment and knowledge—the knowledge, namely, that the other is superior to oneself in judgment and insight and that for this reason his judgment takes precedence—i.e., it has priority over one's own. This is connected with the fact that authority cannot actually be bestowed but is earned, and must be earned if someone is to lay claim to it. It rests on acknowledgment and hence on an act of reason itself which, aware of its own limitations, trusts to the better insight of others. Authority in this sense, properly understood, has nothing to do with blind obedience to commands....its true basis is an act of freedom and reason.... acknowledging authority is always connected with the idea that what the authority says is not irrational and arbitrary but can, in principle, be discovered to be true». (Gadamer 2006, p. 281)

Gadamer's overall reasoning about authority seems cogent; but, is it an accurate description of the Enlightenment or, more specifically, of its forerunner, Descartes?²⁵ Such

frequently is, though within one person) between a number of views, and this is similar to Marion's characterization of the Meditations as "responsorial". These claims are both thought-provoking and textually grounded, though the *prima facie* evidence for Descartes as the Meditator is suggested by his own claiming of the meditative process in both the *Discourse* and the Preface to the Reader of the Meditations. In any case, neither Kosman's nor Larmore's argument (nor Marion's, of course) are incompatible from the notion that the Meditator, whoever he may be, is creating the space in which to undergo the process of enlightenment. Similarly, Louis Loeb's 1986 arguments for a "dissimulation hypothesis" for the *Meditations*, much qualified recently (Loeb 2010, pp.34-57), do not, I think, affect the notion that Descartes' project is to create an enlightened space. If anything, Loeb's ascription of a naturalist epistemology to Descartes (which eschews reliance on God) is, independently of its own merits, a point in favour of Descartes as Kantian style enlightener.

²³ As the context suggest, the issue involves authority *external* to the individual reasoned.

²⁴ He goes on to say his own view is that there is no absolute antithesis between authority or tradition on the one hand, and reason on the other. (Gadamer 2006, p.282)

²⁵ See Allison's 1990 discussion for a response to Gadamer's worries with regard to Kant. Allison shows that only when one isolates the maxim of thinking for oneself from the other two maxims of enlightenment, in the third Critique, in the *Anthropology*, and in the *Jäsche Logic*, does the issue of abstract and hypercritical ungrounded reason arise. I think this can be done for Descartes as well, but this requires a fuller treatment of

a hypercritical reason is also criticized as an *individual* reason, the isolated and abstractly rational subjectivity that Hans Jonas connects to Kant (Jonas 1973, pp. 43-35) but which could easily be attributed (and often is) to Descartes. This is an abstract and empty rationality, the pale anemic subjectivity of Ryle's ghost in the machine. Taken together with the anti-authoritarianism, such features make Cartesian subjectivity look thoroughly isolated, abandoning the robust social sense of the self, such as that found in Hegel, perhaps.²⁶

However, Descartes does much more than just radically deconstruct authority and tradition; he uses hyperbolic doubt as a particular kind of tool, to articulate a synthesis of rationality and authority not unlike that found in Kant's *What is Enlightenment?* He has to achieve the abstraction and isolation of the *Meditations* with a good deal of effort and while the content of his world presents itself to him under the aspect of authority and tradition, his goal is to provide a sound *foundation* for any content which is true.

Moreover, reading the *cogito* as abstract and empty ignores the relationship in Meditation Two between the *cogito* and the *cogitationes*, which constitute a rich though unsatisfying "world" of sorts for Descartes. We thus definitely find a social sense of the self in Descartes alongside his rejection of an *uncritical* sociality of which Descartes was only too keenly aware and which he sought to limit.

5. Meditation One: Artificial secession as power over my own epistemic attitude, power over my judgment, power to think for myself

Descartes opens the *Meditations* with his famous backward glance at what he once knew, what he eventually realized as false, and what his project is for overcoming such falsity:

«Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last». (AT 17; CSM 12).²⁷

the *Meditations* as a whole and the project of the *Discourse*, especially the publicity which Descartes eventually endorses.

²⁶ In his recent book on Kant's *What Is Enlightenment?* Samuel Fleischacker ably defends Kant against charges of isolation and anti-social thinking. (as does, of course, Deligiorgi) It is not clear who does quite the same for Descartes, but Jean-Luc Marion's recent volumes on Descartes seem to go some way toward at least showing that he is not quite the thinker of isolation as usually portrayed. Many Descartes scholars interested in his relation to mediaeval thinkers (e.g., Anthony Kenny) also emphasize this.

²⁷ Quotations from Descartes are from the *Meditations* and are from the translation in *The Philosophical Writings* by Cottingham. The Latin is from *Oeuvres de Descartes*, Volume IX, edited by Adam and Tannery. Citations are given with from the Adam and Tannery first, with the Cottingham page abbreviated to the standard CSM; I have also consulted Cottingham's 2013 stand alone translation of the *Meditations*, which is based in large part on the previous CSM version.

After retailing his reservations about the enormity of the task and his procrastination on it, he switches from the historical past into the perfect tense and thence into present tense as he states that "...today I have expressly rid my mind of all worries and arranged for myself a clear stretch of free time. I am here quite alone, and at last I will devote myself sincerely and without reservation to the general demolition²⁸ of my opinions." (AT17-18; CSM 12)

It is worth noting that the verb, *secedo*, used in "I am here quite alone" (*solus secedo*), means "to go apart, separate, withdraw" with other overtones of retiring from public life and political overtones of rebellion.²⁹ I want to suggest that Descartes is turning himself quite artificially and temporarily into a *whole*, rather than accepting his social aspect as a *part*, the aspect linked to mechanism by Kant. The artifice is reinforced by the "pretence within pretence" motif of Meditation One, where the project of hyperbolic doubt, rejected by Descartes elsewhere as a real issue (including the Synopsis of the *Meditations*), is presented to us as "pretending for a time that these former opinions are utterly false and imaginary." (AT 22; CSM II, 15) This pretence is implicit in the dream hypothesis but is quite explicit in the adoption of the demon hypothesis, which is a "supposing" done by Descartes himself.

In this framework of conscious pretence, Descartes does not question (rightly or wrongly) whether the actual phenomena he is experiencing could be different *qua* actual phenomena. He says: "Suppose then that I am dreaming, and that these particulars—that my eyes are open, that I am moving my head and stretching out my hands—are not true. Perhaps, indeed, I do not even have such hands or such a body at all." (AT19; CSM II, 13) He does *not*, however, say that he is doing something else, at least, from the point of view of his own observation. He could be a brain in a vat, of course, not a man in a dressing gown, as described in the earlier paragraph. But his experience right now is not describable as "brain in vat" but as "man wearing dressing gown near fire, my eyes open, etc." He may be worried that he is *actually* something utterly different (the brain in the vat) but he is not worried about what he will later call the "objective reality" of the ideas he is experiencing. He is worried about their "formal reality," about their ontological not their phenomenological status.

²⁸ In the light of Gadamer's worries, it is important to note that for Descartes such a demolition is strictly in the space of theoretical reason.

²⁹ *sē-cēdo*, *cessi*, *cessum*, 3, v. n., I. *to go apart, go away, separate, withdraw* (class.; not in Cæs.; but cf. *secessio*). B. In partic. 1. *To go aside, withdraw, retire* b. In post-Aug. authors (esp. in Suet.), *to retire from public into private life; absol.*: c. *To seek the exclusive society of any one, to retire from the world*: "ad optimos viros," Sen. Ot. Sap. 1, 1. —2. Polit., *to separate one's self by rebellion, to revolt, secede* II. Trop. (very rare; perh. only poet. and in post-Aug. prose): "antequam ego incipio secedere et aliā parte considerare," *to dissent from the opinion*, Sen. Ep. 117, 4: "a fesso corpore sensus," Cat. 64, 189: "qui solitarius separatusque a communi malo civitatis secesserit," *has withdrawn himself*, Gell. 2, 12, 1: "cum ad stilum secedet," *shall give himself up to writing*, Quint. 1, 12, 12: "in te ipse secede," *retire within yourself*, Sen. Ep. 25, 7. All this material selected from the entry in: A Latin Dictionary. Founded on Andrews' edition of Freund's Latin dictionary. revised, enlarged, and in great part rewritten by. Charlton T. Lewis, Ph.D. and. Charles Short, LL.D. Oxford. Clarendon Press. 1879. The National Endowment for the Humanities provided support for entering this text.

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0059%3Aentry%3Dsecedo>
Accessed Friday, September 05, 2014

This is at the core of his artificial hypotheses. Descartes worries about the *causes* of his ideas, identifying false information about these causes as something he “had accepted as true” (*admiserim*: had admitted, had allowed in). He states, right after the explicit supposition of the all powerful demon, that “I shall stubbornly and firmly persist in this meditation; and even if it is not in my power to know any truth, I shall at least do what is in my power, [to suspend my judgment (French version)] that is, resolutely guard against assenting to any falsehoods, so that the deceiver, however powerful and cunning he may be, will be unable to impose on me in the slightest degree.” (AT23; CSM II, 15).

This is not a passive subjectivity, even in its worries. Moreover, the activity, much like Kantian subjectivity, is a formal activity, a consciousness of the idea of freedom. For Descartes deception can take away my freedom at the deepest level in some ways but not when I can ask the question about deception in Meditation One and then continue unfolding its implications in Meditation Two.

We can now ask whether the project, as set up in Meditation One, shows the marks of enlightenment. With the four points of non-enlightenment in mind, we can see that Meditation One’s project itself addresses all four problems. The Meditator is anxious *not* to rely on rote learning, on traditional knowledge, without at least testing for its truth in the court of reason. In this context he will take hyperbolic pains to rely on no one, at least at the outset and the very point of *solus secedo* is to guard against the unreflectively accepted intellectual influence of others. Additionally, the Meditator is no mechanical part, subordinated to others but, rather, is making the whole answerable to him by proving its epistemic worth. This interaction or feedback by one whom Descartes himself understands to be a part (himself normally), is essentially enlightenment, even if one thinks the later Meditations move away from this.³⁰ And, finally, the Meditator is no child, either actually or metaphorically: he has left his minority in virtue of his isolation and also in virtue of his demand that everything answer to his reason. In other words, the Meditator is trying to think for himself and has, through the *solus secedo*, created the artificial space, physical, social, epistemic, within which such thinking can safely take place.³¹ In this artificial space, tradition becomes answerable to the court of reason.

6. Meditation Two, Part I: Actively asserting the subject

What then is this self which is trying to emerge from its minority, from the heavy hand of tradition, or, at least, unreflective tradition? Is it, fundamentally, a statement about my

³⁰ I would argue that they do not. But this is too large a topic to address here, especially in its relationship to the nature and power of God. . Tom Vinci’s discussion of Descartes’ epistemology, especially of his truth rule of clarity and distinctness, meticulously constructs an argument involving the nature of the rule and its use, which allows a convincing solution to the “Cartesian Circle” problem. See Vinci 1998, especially chapters 1-3 and the epilogue, in which Cartesian epistemology’s relation to scepticism is explored in more general terms.

³¹ The precepts of the *Discourse*, Part III, make clear how important such safety is for Descartes, reflecting his clear understanding that theoretical and practical reason are quite distinct. In Part III, as in much of the *Discourse* and the *Meditations*, the spatial motifs are abundant.

isolated subjectivity and not a statement about the world? This last point will affect just how enlightened the Cartesian *res cogitans* can be, since Kantian enlightenment cannot be, in the nature of things, about an isolated non-social subjectivity.³²

John Cottingham points out that the *cogito*, as what Descartes calls *cognitio*, knowledge of a sort by immediate acquaintance, is different from *scientia*, systematic knowledge, such as science or a system of natural philosophy and that this difference has implications for certain Cartesian problems, such as the Cartesian circle. For example, in the second set of Objections Descartes is asked about his claim in the Meditations, especially Meditation Five, that God is necessary to guarantee the veracity of all genuine knowledge, especially knowledge dependent on memory. Specifically the objectors (AT124-125; CSM II, 89) want to know whether the veracity of the *cogito* depends on God. If it does, Descartes cannot escape the Cartesian circle: if we need the *cogito* for the idea of God in order then to prove God's existence through the nature of this idea, then we need the *cogito* to be independently true. We cannot say that we know its truth only if a veracious God exists, since we need the *cogito* to know that a veracious God exists.³³

In the second set of replies, Descartes sidesteps the objectors' question by stating that the *cogito* is a first principle and that knowledge of first principles is not knowledge in the normal sense (AT 140; CSM II, 100). It is, as Cottingham points out, *cognitio*³⁴, whereas God is necessary for *scientia*, systematic knowledge.

There is good reason not to see the *cogito*, even as *cognitio*, as hyper-isolated and abstract way. For one thing, it does not make sense of the discussion of the *cogitationes*, the *pensées* which are part and parcel of the Je pense. As Anthony Kenny points out there is probably no limit the subject can raise to the number of examples of the *cogitationes*³⁵, each of which is a "worldly" reinforcement of the thinking subject. (Kenny 2009, p. 47).³⁶

³² Deligiorgi strongly emphasizes and develops this point in her discussion of Kant's "culture of enlightenment."

³³ The entire problem of the "Cartesian Circle" is, in many ways, vitally important for any assessment of Descartes' complete project and system as reflecting enlightenment.

³⁴ Cottingham: "Descartes seems to distinguish here between an isolated cognition or act of awareness (*cognitio*) and systematic, properly grounded knowledge (*scientia*)." (CSM II, 100, note 2) While I disagree with the characterization of "an isolated cognition" (as the next section's discussion of the *cogitationes* makes clear), Cottingham elsewhere has put his finger on the central problem for seeing Descartes as an "enlightener", though this important problem will not be addressed in this article. This is the tension between the autonomy and independence of reason on the one hand and what Cottingham calls Descartes' conception of "creatureliness", a conception that brings us back, as Meditations Three, Four, and Five do, to a necessary dependence on "a creative power", i.e. God. "This tension between independence and creatureliness pervades the entire structure of the *Meditations*." (Cottingham 2013, "Philosophical introduction", xxiii). Much of this is discussed, at greater length, in Cottingham's 2008 book, *Cartesian Reflections*.

³⁵ Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the importance of the *cogitationes* as well and seems generally to stress the role of attention and judgment in Descartes, something which will be discussed further below. See the, preface xiv, Introduction section: Chapter 3 on attention and judgment, especially pp. 47-50, and Part 3, Chapter 1, on "The Cogito".

³⁶ This more cognitive dimension to the "I think" is illuminated by reading Descartes through an Augustinian lens, as Cottingham and others have commented, even if, as Marion has noted, there are important and radical differences between the two thinkers. (Marion 2007, pp.23-26) I have discussed some of these Augustinian/Cartesian similarities and differences elsewhere.

7. Meditation Two, Part II: The “world” of the *cogitationes*

If the *cogito*, the “I think,” is rooted in the struggles of the Augustinian *fallor*, then the world of the Cartesian *cogitationes*, the thoughts, gives the *cogito* some purchase on its otherness as they unfold the richness of the thinking self and its activity.³⁷ In so doing, they draw attention to how content of thinking can be questioned by the Meditator in the process of enlightenment. Appearing initially to present the world, the *cogitationes*, at this stage, show no such warrant; when the Meditator dares to know them they turn out, for the time being, to be only his thoughts, to lead him back to himself, rather than forward toward the world.³⁸ This is itself an advance, since the Meditator now knows that he needs a foundational epistemic warrant for his knowledge (*scientia*), namely, the secure and grounding existence of an absolute idea, the idea of God. While Kant and Descartes are bound to disagree on the need for this particular type of foundational epistemic warrant, they should agree that coming to understand the *status* of one’s ideas *as* one’s ideas initially is already an advance over naïve or unenlightened notions of experience. This is the first step in the enlightenment project as laid out in section 40 of the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, to think for oneself and also the main step of *WIE*; the second step, to think from the point of view of everyone else, is not available to the Meditator at this stage in the *Meditations*.

Descartes makes a well-known and much challenged transition from the *cogito* (strictly, *sum, existo*) to the *res cogitans*, the thinking thing. He then gives a very inclusive definition of thinking, one which will be changed considerably first in Meditation Four and then in Meditation Six. Here the definition comprises everything that one could see as falling under consciousness generally: “But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions.” (AT 28; CSM II, 19)³⁹ He then asks if everything on this “considerable list” belongs to him and in so doing finds that he is a much more complicated centre of activity than the opening of Meditation Two might suggest. He is diversified into a series of activities, all of which presage the *cogitationes*:

«Is it not one and the same ‘I’ who is now doubting almost everything, who nonetheless understands some things, who affirms that this one thing is true, denies everything else, desires to know more, is unwilling to be deceived, imagines many things even involuntarily, and is aware of many things which apparently come from the senses? Are not all these things just as true as the fact that I exist, even if I am asleep all the time, and

³⁷ This richness of the self comes to fruition in Spinoza and Leibniz, particularly in Leibniz’s interplay of possible world and monad.

³⁸ In the end, of course, the *cogitationes* do lead to the world, first through the idea of God in Meditations Three and Five and secondly, through the idea of body in Meditation Six.

³⁹ The last line consists of present active participles such as *dubitans, intelligens, negans, volens, sentiens* and could be translated: a thing doubting, understanding, ...perceiving etc. Descartes is conscious of himself doing all of these things in the present moment, thus lending some credence to his own claim that he is not making an inference in the initial presentation of the *cogito*.

even if he who created me is doing all he can to deceive me? Which of these activities is distinct from my thinking? Which of them can be said to be separate from myself?» (AT 28-29; CSM II, 19)

Descartes then goes on to say that those objects which appear to him in sensation may not exist but he certainly seems to experience them and that it is in this limited way he can be said to “image and sense” even though what he is imagining and sensing may be false. In this limited sense, even an activity like perception, so different initially from the abstract rational claim of the *cogito*, is actually the enriched version of the *cogito*.

At this stage, then, the differentiation in the activity of the thinking self becomes a differentiation in the objects of the cogitated world. Descartes, finding himself slipping back into the old, socialized, traditional, common sense way of thinking and thus finding his *solus secedo* threatened by his mental embeddedness, decides to allow his mind free rein in considering one of the objects of the traditionally viewed world, the notorious piece of wax.

In its strange transformations, the wax could, somewhat imaginatively, be read as a material record of all the Cartesian transformations to date and, indeed, many of those to come. Less imaginatively, it becomes the representative of all the *res extensa*, all the material things of the world which become transformed under the modern mathematical eye. The wax goes through two significant transformations, firstly, from its one sensory thing to another, sensibly different thing, and secondly, from a sensory object to a mathematical, geometrical object. In the sensory transformation we are informed that the fragrant smell of the flowers, the sweet taste of the honey, are all transformed in the wax into melted, hot, liquid, no longer possessing these qualities. The wax remains, even in this strange pool. Why? Descartes concludes that the wax was none of these things, not the sweet taste, the fragrant scent, the cold hardness or the hot liquid. Just as Descartes himself was “*Nempe dubitans, intelligens*” etc., the active thinking thing, the wax is “*nempe nihil aliud quam extensum quid, flexibile, mutabile*”, something extended, flexible, changeable. How does Descartes know this? As with Plato and Augustine, the answer is through my judging intellect, something applicable to the next example, when Descartes asks whether the humans he sees crossing the square could, under their hats and coats, be “*automata*”. “*Sed judico hominess esse*”, but I judge that they are human beings, solely through the “*scrutiny of the mind alone.*” And, should anyone think the wax and the people are unrelated, Descartes refers to regarding the wax as taking off its clothing and considering it naked, and solely through the mind.

However, as Anthony Kenny has emphasized, the *cogitationes*, including the wax and the humans, prove also that Descartes is a thinking thing. Meditation Two concludes that this peculiar “world” is tied into the proof of the *cogito*:

«For if I judge that the wax exists from the fact that I see it, clearly this same fact entails much more evidently that I myself also exist. It is possible that what I see is not really the wax; it is possible that I do not even have eyes with which to see anything. But when I see, or think I see (*I am not here distinguishing the two*), it is simply not possible that I who am

now thinking am not something. By the same token if I judge that the wax exists from the fact that I touch it, the same result follows, namely that I exist. If I judge that it exists from the fact that I imagine it, or for any other reason, exactly the same thing follows. *And the result that I have grasped in the case of the wax may be applied to everything else located outside me*⁴⁰....This is because every consideration whatsoever which contributes to my perception of the wax, *or of any other body, cannot but establish even more effectively the nature of my own mind*». ⁴¹ (AT 33; CSM II, p.22; emphases added)

The “world” of the *cogitationes*, though still a world of thought, thus continues the project of enlightenment by presenting the thinking subject, the Meditator, with the worldly material whose status he or she must interrogate. Real or not, I must be satisfied that the status of my ideas has been satisfactorily proven to me, even if, as Meditation Three will go on to discuss, such satisfaction may involve ideas which could never have only been part of my mind.⁴² That, however, is a new and troubling stage in the journey of enlightenment, a rocky journey which for Kant, unlike Descartes, constitutes the battlefield of metaphysics. Nonetheless, Descartes enters this contest as someone ready for an answer, however different from Kant’s, which at least locates itself in the court of reason, if not quite in a critique of *pure* reason.

8. Conclusion: Building the court of reason?

Thus, the Cartesian *solus secedo* licenses and indeed is the explicit space of the Kantian *sapere aude*. Kant’s semi-Cartesian⁴³ recovery of the troubled insights of a subjectivity not fully dominated by social or empirical determinations, is, of course, a recovery which then tries to balance the social and the subjective *not* through transcendence as such, unlike Descartes, but through the highly involved and weighty means of the critical philosophy and its substitution of transcendental method for transcendent insight. The calm, cold, waters of Kant’s transcendental idealism may or may not be an advance of some sort over the “metaphysics, hot, spicy, and eternal”⁴⁴ of Descartes. Nonetheless, reflecting on one’s rational subjectivity and its status and limitations sets the stage for an enlightenment project by building part of the foundation of a court of reason: Such reflection forms the precondition for a minimalist enlightenment. Kantian or not, this artificially induced and temporary epistemic solitude is a crucial step in emerging from one’s minority,

⁴⁰ Descartes’ worries about the relation of his subjectivity to what is outside him, God and the external world are revealed, especially in Meditations III, V, VI, through the expressions *in me, a/ad me, extra/ex me, ex meis ideis, sine me*.

⁴¹ Merleau-Ponty emphasizes this point in his chapter, “The *Cogito*.” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p.435)

⁴² Chief among these, of course, is the idea of an infinite substance: God.

⁴³ This is not a self-professed Cartesianism, in spite of Kant’s relatively mild position toward Descartes in the “Refutation of Idealism” and in spite of sympathies with aspects of the Cartesian “I think”

⁴⁴ Thus Gil Shalev, in his comments on Peter Harris’ presentation in the Philosophy Winter Colloquium 2015, Memorial University. I am myself inclined toward the colder ice palace of a bounded Kantian reason but this itself does not exclude Descartes, at least in principle, from being a full enlightener. Generally, I want to thank Gil for discussions with me about Descartes over the years which have been a source of much insight, especially on the proofs of God’s existence, and the general import of the Cartesian Circle

untrammelled, at least initially, by the forced guidance of others. The metaphysics of individual subjectivity thus takes us a long way toward a critique of pure reason⁴⁵ and thence to, perhaps, a social proceduralism which, given a strong individual site of resistance, can be engaged in by rational actors who can engage in the reciprocity of dialogue without their individual voices being overwhelmed. The *solus secedo* ensures that one side of the dialogue, my individual interiority, no matter how difficult to conceive today in the face of language games and other notions of socialization, eludes a reduction to my social context, thus allowing me, a Kantian moral agent with critical reason, to say “no” to society’s “yes”.⁴⁶ In this normative sense, social transformation presupposes the possibility of the *critical* individual, in community with critical *others*, imagining such transformation (and possibly enacting it).⁴⁷ To paraphrase R.H. Tawney, the great social historian, Karl Marx was the last of the Cartesians.⁴⁸

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⁴⁵ I owe much to the patience and critical engagement of many of my classes, in this case, especially to the students, undergraduate and graduate, from various iterations of the Descartes course, several seminars on Spinoza and Leibniz, and, in the last couple of years also classes in Rationalism and in the History of Modern philosophy. They have tolerated, encouraged, and written about tortured reflection on rational subjectivity in its own right and in relation to eternity, helping me in my own reflections on these topics.

⁴⁶ This paper came, in part, out of a commentary on Samuel Fleischacker’s keynote talk for an inaugural conference at Memorial organized by Scott Johnston and Joël Madore in 2013, on Kant’s *What is Enlightenment?* My thanks to the organizers for their encouragement, comments, especially Joël Madore’s detailed editorial feedback, and patience as organizers and editors. I have also benefited from comments on the Descartes material at the 2015 Atlantic Canada Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy and from discussions with Tom Vinci, whose work has always made Descartes convincing to me.

⁴⁷ I do stress “normative.” Why social transformation actually happens when it does may have little or nothing to do with critical individuals, critical communities, or any such rational actors; the likelihood is that transformation may happen for a host of other, non-rational reasons. But transformation still presumes that things can be otherwise, both socially and for an individual.

⁴⁸ Tawney’s actual comment (in *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*) was that Karl Marx was the last of the *Schoolmen*, probably an even more remarkable (or unlikely) comparison. My own comment is primarily to emphasize that Descartes, who says “change yourself, not the world” in the *Discourse*, has a link of sorts to a social revolutionary like Marx, for whom such transformation should be of the world as well. And, as Tom Sorell points out, the two have this in common, that there is a “Cartesianism” quite distinct from though related to Descartes himself just as there is a Marxism quite distinct from though also related to Marx. (Sorell 2005, p.xxi)

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