

Can Feminists Be Cartesians?

BRIE GERTLER *University of Wisconsin, Madison*

RÉSUMÉ : Cet article défend l'une des thèses centrales du cartésianisme (mais pas Descartes lui-même) contre les objections féministes. Je montre que l'approche « en première personne » adoptée par Descartes au sujet de notre connaissance des esprits est au moins compatible avec les positions féministes clés, et peut même renforcer certaines des plus centrales parmi elles. L'article porte sur deux doctrines cartésiennes : (1) l'individualisme épistémique et (2) l'introspectivisme. Ma défense exploite le potentiel qu'offre la stratégie méditative de Descartes pour miner certains présupposés politiquement chargés. Plus généralement, il s'agit de montrer que l'approche en première personne qu'adopte le cartésianisme à l'endroit des questions épistémiques et conceptuelles peut constituer, pour le féminisme, un très bon outil anti-autoritarien.

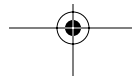


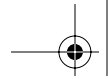
1. Introduction

To say that Descartes's views have fallen into disfavour is to understate the case. In many intellectual circles, including much of philosophical feminism, the very term "Cartesian" serves as a pejorative. I believe that Descartes's views are often dismissed too quickly in contemporary work, either because they are misinterpreted or because they are applied, with unhappy results, beyond their intended domain. My goal here is not to rehabilitate Cartesianism generally but to defend one leading strand of Descartes's thought against feminist criticism. I will show that Descartes's "first-person" approach to our knowledge of minds, which has been criticized on feminist grounds, is at least compatible with key feminist views. My argument suggests that this strand of Cartesianism may even bolster some central feminist positions.

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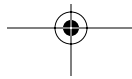
I will address two theses which follow from Descartes's *cogito* argument, which together express his basic position regarding our knowledge of minds.

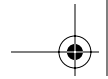
- (1) Knowing "I exist" does not entail being justified in believing that other persons exist (*Epistemic Individualism*).
- (2) To truly grasp another's mental states (including emotional states), one must draw on introspective knowledge of one's own mental states (*Introspectivism*).

My objective is limited in several ways. First, I do not claim, of any particular feminist objection, that it is directed towards either of these two theses specifically, although I cite objections which appear to be so directed. Second, and relatedly, my purpose is to show that the two theses can accommodate leading ideas in feminist thought. My aim is not to challenge the substance of any feminist view. Third, I do not address other Cartesian views that have been the target of feminist objections, including the following: reason can, and should, operate independently of emotional influences; persons are equipped with perfectly free and autonomous wills; and mind and body are ontologically distinct. The article attempts to be neutral as to whether feminist arguments undermine these other views and neutral about Descartes's own opinions regarding women. Fourth, I do not argue for the two theses themselves. I do accept them, but nothing I say here rests upon their being true. Finally, I make no attempt to defend my reading of the *cogito*—which I believe to be fairly uncontroversial—as an accurate interpretation of Descartes's text.

Here is a brief reminder of Descartes's case for Theses 1 and 2 in his *Meditations*. Just prior to the *cogito*, Descartes's meditator has, so far as she¹ is able, suspended belief in everything which she finds it possible to doubt, including the deliverances of the senses and intellect. In the throes of this doubt, she discovers that, so long as she is reflecting on her own current thought, she cannot suspend belief about the fact that she is thinking. She therefore concludes that she, *qua* thinking being, exists. "So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, 'I am, I exist,' is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind" (Descartes 1988, p. 80; AT 25).

Descartes takes this argument to establish epistemic individualism (Thesis [1]), since no justification for the belief that someone else exists is logically implicated in the meditator's knowledge that "I exist." (Other persons are of course *causally* implicated here, given that the meditator would not have existed were it not for the existence of her parents.) Further, because the meditator's thought exclusively grounds her belief, the argument provides the basis for Thesis (2). If one can know that one



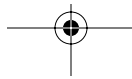


exists, while doubting that anything physical exists, then one's own thought enjoys a special epistemic status as compared with physical things. This epistemic asymmetry reflects a conceptual divide between the mental and the physical, on Descartes's view. The nature of this conceptual divide renders inadequate any way of conceptualizing the mental, including any way of conceptualizing another person's thoughts, which does not draw on some introspective grasp of one's own thoughts (Thesis [2]). While the close relation between Thesis (1) and Thesis (2) will be apparent throughout the article, to aid exposition I shall discuss each of them separately.

2. The Case against Epistemic Individualism

Feminists have objected to a range of traditional epistemological views, including epistemic individualism, by claiming that such views assimilate all epistemic subjects to specifically masculine subjects. As applied to epistemic individualism (Thesis [1]), this objection charges that the impression that each human thinker is conceptually solitary is an illusion, and one to which masculine persons are singularly vulnerable.² Catharine MacKinnon voices this objection when she says that Descartes is wrong to assume that all persons are in a position to doubt the external world. "I'm coming to think that because men have power over women, women come to epistemological issues situated in a way that sheds a rather distinct light on [our justification for believing in an external world] as men have agonized over it" (1987a, p. 57). On MacKinnon's view, those without power cannot doubt the existence of an external world, including other persons, for power is needed for insulating oneself from the effects of the external world and of others' actions. In this way, "Cartesian doubt . . . comes from the luxury of a position of power" (ibid., p. 58).

Lorraine Code endorses a similar objection to epistemic individualism which she borrows from Seyla Benhabib. Benhabib claims that, as Code puts it, individualist epistemologies "ignore the primacy of knowing and being known by other people in cognitive development" (Code 1995, p. 46, citing Benhabib 1987, p. 85). Code argues that this objection undermines Descartes's epistemic individualism: "Descartes's radical doubt . . . consistently bypasses the epistemic significance of early experiences with other people" (Code 1995, p. 46). Like MacKinnon's, this objection also attributes neglect of the epistemic significance of interaction to masculine bias, for part of being socialized as masculine is learning to see oneself as autonomous and self-sufficient, and thus devalue the social realm. Because relations to other persons are central to socialized feminine identity, feminine persons are much less likely to overlook the general significance of social interaction.



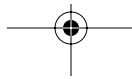
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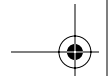
These objections charge that Descartes's conclusion reflects a masculine bias. With his famous method of doubt, Descartes attempted to suspend, or at least render ineffectual, one's assumptions and biases. (More generally, Descartes used the meditator's focus on knowledge rather than action to defuse the influence of desires and interests.³) If the objections just cited are correct, Descartes's method of doubt, which forms the context for the *cogito*, does not have its intended outcome.

To see the force of Descartes's method of doubt, consider the *Meditations*' treatment of the question "Is there a God?" Descartes's treatment of this question nicely exemplifies his attempt to help his audience to suspend deeply seated biases and background assumptions. He knew that religious faith was not only well entrenched in his audience, but was also highly cherished by them. Yet the doubt about God's existence is maintained even after the *cogito*, indicating the strength of Descartes's commitment to suspending prior assumptions and biases. In effect, MacKinnon, Benhabib, and Code allege that Descartes failed in this attempt to suspend biases, as regards epistemic individualism, since a (masculine) bias blinded him to the crucial role which other persons play in an individual's belief-forming processes.

Here is an obvious way one might defend Thesis (1) from this allegation. The dubitability of the existence of others, in the *Meditations*'s strict sense of "dubitability," shows merely that the meditator's current introspective state is not conceptually or *epistemically* linked to others' existence; these are surely causally and *psychologically* linked. The MacKinnon-Benhabib-Code objections to epistemic individualism conflate psychological priority with epistemic priority. Roughly, mental state *A* is *psychologically* prior to state *B* iff, as a matter of psychological law or developmental regularity, *B*'s occurrence *implies* that *A* has occurred (and *A*'s occurrence does not similarly imply that *B* has occurred). State *A* (in this case, a belief state) is *epistemically* prior to (belief state) *B* iff, as a matter of epistemic-justificatory norms, *B*'s justification *logically entails* that *A* is justified (and *A*'s justification does not entail that *B* is justified).⁴ One may endorse the Cartesian claim that belief in one's own existence is *epistemically* prior to belief in others' existence, while at the same time admitting that other states are *psychologically* prior to any belief in one's own existence. That is, one may accept epistemic individualism while recognizing that interactions with others are *causally* necessary for belief in one's own existence. So, Thesis (1) is consistent both with MacKinnon's claim that other persons causally influence beliefs and with the Benhabib-Code claim that interpersonal relations are crucial to one's cognitive development.

This response, though superficially attractive, seriously underestimates the MacKinnon-Benhabib-Code objection to epistemic individualism and others like it. Feminist theorists who advance such objections are





standardly aware of the ostensible distinction between epistemic priority and psychological priority. Far from failing to notice this distinction, they instead expressly reject it; they deny that the conceptual-epistemic is truly distinct, in principle, from the causal-psychological. This denial partially explains why feminist theorists have been drawn to naturalizing projects in epistemology, and have found theoretical allies in Hume and Quine, the leading proponents of such projects. (See, for instance, Antony 1993; Baier 1993; Duran 1990; and Nelson 1990.)

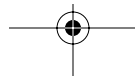
The feminist rebuttal of the “conflation” response brings into sharper focus the line of feminist objection under consideration. Feminist critics claim that the notion of a sphere of conceptual truths about the epistemic—distinct from contingent psychological truths—is an empty idealization. For no actual belief-forming process is epistemically “pure,” unadulterated by contingencies of psychological make-up. The belief that cognition can and should operate uninfluenced by psychological contingencies—dispositions affected by social standing and upbringing—is itself rooted in masculine bias, on this view. Masculine psychological dispositions, including the disposition to accept epistemic individualism, are mistakenly treated as the path to certainty, and thus enshrined as epistemic. At the same time, feminine psychological dispositions, including the disposition to reject epistemic individualism, are relegated to the “merely psychological” realm. These feminists conclude that the masculine inclination to accept epistemic individualism is as much a product of social standing and upbringing as is the feminist inclination to reject epistemic individualism.

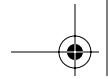
I use “masculine” and “feminine,” rather than “male” and “female,” to underscore the fact that such psychological types depend upon conditioning and are not essential to men and women as biological types. It is worthwhile to pause briefly to examine the consequences of non-essentialism for the feminist objections to epistemic individualism under discussion.

Feminists and others have developed a variety of accounts of psychological conditioning, including psychoanalytic accounts, to provide a non-essentialist explanation for the ubiquity of feminine females and masculine males. Susan Bordo neatly captures the non-essentialist objection to Cartesian individualism in the following comment about Nancy Chodorow’s (1978) psychoanalytic account of gender identification.

The central importance of Chodorow’s work has been to show that boys have tended to grow up learning to experience the world like Cartesians, while girls do not, because of developmental asymmetries resulting from female-dominated infant care, rather than biology, anatomy, or “nature.” (Bordo 1987, p. 113)

In other words, gender disparity in child-rearing has rendered males more disposed to adopting a Cartesian outlook, an outlook which favours





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epistemic individualism. As a result of its association with males, the psychological proclivity towards Cartesian individualism is lionized as *epistemic*, while psychological dispositions associated with females are dismissed as “merely” psychological.

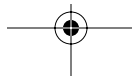
Recognition of these sorts of deep, far-reaching consequences of gender socialization has led many to press for equal male and female participation in child care so that all children, whose desires and attitudes are shaped by their observations of adult behaviour, may live full lives, free from gender-based constraints. Two broad versions of this proposal should be distinguished. The first version allows that even those free from gender constraints may apprehend the world “like Cartesians.” The second version says that apprehending the world “like Cartesians” is inherently tied to gender-based constraints, and is always distorting. (Bordo endorses this second version; she maintains that a just society would be one in which no one experienced the world “like Cartesians,” since such experience depends upon and propagates unjust societal conditions. Chodorow leans towards the first version, although at times she seems to appreciate the attractions of the second.) These reactions to accounts of gender socialization thus differ normatively: only the first is neutral as to whether apprehending the world “like Cartesians” is part of a complete, politically acceptable way of life.

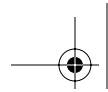
But what is important for the current discussion is a claim on which these reactions converge: that epistemic individualism treats as universal epistemic truth what is actually, at present, psychologically peculiar to masculine persons. So the core argument to show that epistemic individualism is androcentric does not depend on the further claim that every psychological tendency currently associated with a particular gender (such as individualist tendencies) must be done away with. One can endorse the core argument while allowing that some such tendencies should simply be redistributed in the population.

3. Defending Epistemic Individualism

The core argument against Thesis (1) charges that the case for epistemic individualism depends upon illicitly treating characteristics of masculine psychology as if they were universal features of cognizers. Code derisively terms this practice of invalidly generalizing from one psychological type to a universal epistemic type “we-saying” (Code 1995, pp. 35-6).⁵ Within the constraints registered at the outset of this paper, I will now try to show that epistemic individualism need not depend on illegitimate generalizations. If I am correct, the method Descartes uses to establish Thesis (2) may actually *undercut* “we-saying.”

The *Meditations* are a series of exercises to be performed by the reader. Descartes modelled this work after medieval spiritual exercises, including those in the Augustinian tradition, which guide the reader through a pro-



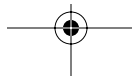


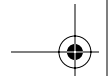
gression of steps designed to purify the soul in preparation for divine illumination. There is, however, a pivotal difference between these spiritual exercises and the *Meditations*. While the former aim to perfect the soul as a passive recipient of divine grace, the latter seek to suspend barriers to the subject's active faculty, viz., her reason. The key point for our purposes is not the particular faculty that Descartes considered active but that, for Descartes, to meditate is to seek knowledge for oneself, without relying on external authority.⁶

The specific object of Descartes's anti-authoritarianism was the accepted Aristotelianism of his day. But his approach is potentially politically subversive not because it aims to overthrow Aristotelianism (regarding the epistemic primacy of sense perception, etc.), but because it aims to overthrow the authoritarian *method*, not itself Aristotelian, which was used to inculcate students in the received Aristotelian view. For Descartes and his contemporaries, this inculcation was achieved by means such as the memorization of syllogisms. By contrast, the *Meditations*' first-person approach rejects reliance on authority of any sort: each reader is invited to undertake the series of meditations, largely a sequence of thought experiments, on her own.

Active engagement is not only suggested but required for profiting from the *Meditations*. The *cogito* models this requirement: it depends for its force exclusively on the reader's engaging in her own introspective, reflective exercise. Without such engagement, the argument is a non-starter, a mere piece of intellectual autobiography devoid of philosophical import. That someone else reached a conclusion based on his introspective experience carries no epistemic weight for Cartesian meditators. The *Meditations* enjoin the reader to perform thought experiments herself; she is not to defer to them as a model of "correct" reasoning. Their fundamental lesson is that warranted belief in conclusions such as Theses (1) and (2) ultimately requires reasoning through the arguments oneself. Hence, substantive results are justified, within Descartes's first-person meditative method, only by *refraining from* so-called "we-saying."

This brief review of the meditative method indicates only that Descartes's case for Thesis (1) exploits a method which aims to avoid bias. But no method can guarantee that one who follows it succeeds in avoiding bias. Feminist critics of Descartes can acknowledge that Descartes attempts, with his meditative strategy, to avoid bias, but they will claim that this attempt fails. These critics need only maintain that some who engage in the thought experiment find that they cannot believe in their own existence while doubting that others exist; they find that any evidence for their own existence is also evidence for others' existence. These critics may then conclude that Thesis (1) is not true of some subjects, and hence—since it is true universally if it is true at all—Thesis (1) is not true at all. More to the point, they may conclude that Descartes commits "we-



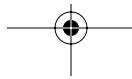
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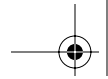
saying” by drawing a universal epistemic conclusion (Thesis [1]) from his own meditative experience.

As I said at the outset, my argument here does not depend on the truth of Thesis (1). My claim is that neither the truth of Thesis (1)—if it is true—nor Descartes’s first-person method of establishing it, is at odds with feminism. Suppose that a Cartesian meditator—let us call her Kate—accepts Thesis (1) on the basis of performing the *cogito*. She is then confronted with someone who denies Thesis (1), even while engaging in the *cogito*, reporting that she cannot believe that she exists while doubting that others exist. There are three ways for Kate to react to this report: (1) allow that she (Kate) has herself erred, in her carrying out of the *cogito*; (2) concede that epistemic individualism is not a universal truth, but applies to only a subset of persons; or (3) maintain that her interlocutor had erred in her carrying out of the *cogito*. It is clear that Descartes would strongly favour option (3). Spelling out his reasons for rejecting options (1) and (2) requires a more detailed rehearsal of the *cogito*.

Introspectively reflecting on her own current mental state—perhaps the fear that an evil genius is manipulating her thoughts—Kate finds it impossible to doubt that there is thinking going on. She then identifies herself just as the thinking thing, that which is undergoing the thinking—the *seat* of the thinking, if you will. Of course, being full of doubts about the source of these thoughts, she does not claim that she is that source. At the moment Kate reflects on her own thought, and finds herself unable to doubt that there is thinking occurring, she discerns that this thinking has, for her, a special epistemic status. She then uses this epistemic status to ground her self-conception, identifying herself simply as that which is undergoing these thoughts.

In short, Kate’s own introspective reflection furnishes her with an epistemic distinction between self and others which supports Thesis (1). (It bears repeating that I am merely describing the *cogito*, and not claiming that it is cogent.) Suppose that Kate now faces the interlocutor who denies Thesis (1), while reporting having engaged in the *cogito*. Suppose further that Kate has become acquainted with work in feminism, and has learned that many of her previous beliefs were the products of mistaken assumptions and biases. These factors may strengthen her determination to apply the meditative method by reminding her how easily one can fall into error. Recognizing that her current acceptance of Thesis (1) is based on memory of the *cogito* and, being intellectually modest, Kate is, let us suppose, moved to carry out the thought experiment again. So, she re-engages in the *cogito* as carefully and attentively as she can. And again she finds it impossible to doubt that there is thinking occurring and thus, identifying herself as “that which is undergoing this thinking,” she finds that she cannot doubt her own existence but she can doubt others’ existence.





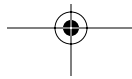
If Kate responds to the interlocutor by adopting option (1), she concedes that she is mistaken and that the apparent epistemic distinction between herself and others is *merely* apparent. But if she concedes this on the basis of someone else's testimony alone, she would surely be guilty of "we-saying"—or, rather, of "they-saying," allowing *others* to speak for her. And if "we-saying," or appropriating the epistemic authority of others, is fraudulent, surely "they-saying," relinquishing to others one's own epistemic authority, is equally fraudulent. So if we are not to allow others to speak for us, then Kate should not concede, just on the basis of another's claim, that she herself is mistaken in believing that she can doubt others' existence while being unable to doubt her own. That is, she should reject option (1).

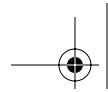
Kate is thus left with two ways to resolve this conflict: either qualify Thesis (1) so that it is not a universal claim (option [2]), or maintain that her interlocutor has not properly carried out the *cogito* (option [3]).

It is Descartes's unwillingness to accept option (2), and the consequence that he must accept option (3), which most exposes him to the charge of "we-saying." But if one carries out the *cogito* with the result Descartes describes—and this article remains neutral on whether anyone will achieve that result—then one can legitimately maintain Thesis (1) in its universal form. That is, Kate can endorse Thesis (1) without "we-saying," even if this forces her to reject or reinterpret claims to the contrary.

Let me explain. While engaging in the *cogito*, Kate finds the epistemic distinction between herself (understood as "that which is undergoing this thinking") and others (understood as "that which undergoes other episodes of thinking") irresistible.⁷ That is, while attending to her thoughts, she cannot doubt that there *are* these thoughts, and hence cannot doubt that she, the seat of the thoughts, exists; but she can doubt that anything else exists. This gives her good reason to believe that anyone who reports a conflicting result is using "I" in a different sense from hers, and to conclude that others' results do not truly conflict with her own. For she can reasonably conclude that anyone in an epistemic situation precisely similar to hers, attending to thoughts with the same apparent directness and immediacy, and who cannot grant "I exist" without also granting "other persons exist," must be using a different conception of "I."

For instance, suppose Sam conceives of himself exclusively as a featherless biped. In the throes of the evil-genius argument, Sam will have no more reason to believe that he exists than that other persons exist, since both propositions are subject to the same sources of doubt, *viz.*, those which threaten the belief "featherless bipeds exist." Given Sam's self-conception, his meditative process has no bearing on the truth of Thesis (1), since the "I" of Thesis (1) refers to an entity conceived only as a thinking thing.



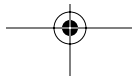
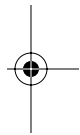
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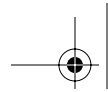
This brings us to an important point: Descartes accepts Thesis (1) only when “I” is glossed as referring to a thinker. Two dangers face this way of glossing Thesis (1): the danger of triviality and the danger of “we-saying.” But, as I now show, it successfully avoids each.

The danger of triviality has the following source. Given that the epistemic status of introspected thought grounds the meditator’s self-conception, Descartes’s gloss of Thesis (1) may appear reducible to the following trivial statement. “Since ‘I’ just refers to that which can be known to exist absent justification for believing that anything else exists, I can know that I (the referent of ‘I’) exist without being justified in believing that anyone else does.” However, Thesis (1) is more substantial than this. It entails that one *can* know, roughly, “there is something undergoing *these* thoughts,” even while one lacks justification for “there are things undergoing *other* thoughts” or “there are physical things.” This is a substantial claim which does not rest on any way of identifying the self. So, even independently of any conception of the self implicit in it, Thesis (1) expresses a non-trivial epistemic claim.

This brings us to the second danger, that Descartes’s gloss of Thesis (1) may commit “we-saying.” Grant that Thesis (1) expresses a substantial claim, that there is an epistemic asymmetry between *these* thoughts and *other* thoughts (and bodies). The further step, of identifying the “I” as that undergoing these thoughts, may appear to rest on “we-saying.” For identifying oneself as that which occupies one side of an epistemic divide is, it could be argued, a characteristically masculine move. The claim that this is the correct way to conceive oneself would then be an invalid generalization from masculine tendencies.

I believe that Descartes is also safe from this second danger. Discussion of Thesis (2) in the following section will partially defend the substance of Thesis (1), as glossed. It will argue that the self-conception arising from the *cogito* is not masculinist but, rather, has a strong affinity with feminist views about interpersonal relations. But Thesis (1) is also defensible on purely structural grounds, for the meditator’s self-conception should be taken as a stipulation. The meditator stipulates that “by ‘I,’ I shall mean ‘the thing undergoing this thinking.’” Because this is purely stipulative, and does not relate the “I” to anything else, it limits the import of Thesis (1) to the non-trivial epistemic claim described previously. So the weight of Thesis (1) is its claim that one *can* know “there is something undergoing *these* thoughts,” even while one lacks justification for “there are things undergoing *other* thoughts” or “there are physical things.” In addition, Thesis (1) contains a stipulation about the referent of “I.” Because this is just a stipulation and does not relate the “I” to anything else, it is not truth-evaluable, and so is invulnerable to the charge of “we-saying.”

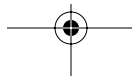
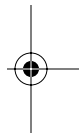
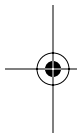




Obviously, much more could be said here. But the upshot of these considerations is that Descartes's first-person meditative method can withstand the feminist charge that the case for epistemic individualism illicitly rests on "we-saying." Epistemic individualism is not to be accepted on the authority of others, for one must perform the *cogito* for oneself. This requirement is intended specifically to avoid biases and background assumptions. To the charge that Descartes fails to avoid biases and "we-saying," in taking the *cogito* to support a universal conclusion while those who engage in the *cogito* have varying results, I have argued as follows. Others' claims to have reached results at odds with Thesis (1) should be taken seriously, and should perhaps prompt the meditator to redouble her meditative efforts. But, to avoid "they-saying," the meditator cannot simply defer to these claims. And *if* her sincere, active engagement in the *cogito* yields the results Descartes foresaw—a hypothesis on which this paper is neutral—it is reasonable for her to attribute others' purportedly conflicting results to another difference, such as a different interpretation of "I." It is therefore reasonable for her to maintain Thesis (1) in its unqualified form, in which it expresses an epistemic asymmetry between "the thing undergoing this thinking"—stipulatively referred to as "I"—and all else.

To close this section, I will briefly show how Descartes's meditative method may serve the aims of a prominent brand of feminist theory of knowledge, feminist standpoint epistemology. (The *locus classicus* here is Hartsock 1983.) According to standpoint theorists, one's social situation limits one's ability to recognize bias or hidden assumptions in one's belief-forming practices. Specifically, those who occupy a powerful or dominant social position are less able, as compared with members of traditionally oppressed groups, to recognize the sorts of bias which maintain the social status quo, and which can distort one's view of the world. Descartes agrees that such biases can distort one's view of the world; this is why he requires, for proper engagement in meditating, that one forswear received bodies of knowledge. He could also agree with feminists that those in power speak with a voice that commands authority, silencing dissent. (See, for instance, Code 1995, p. 27; Harding 1993, p. 63.) Resisting such authorities—which for Descartes included the scholastic establishment—contributes to the difficulty of meditating.

Even if Cartesianism and feminist standpoint epistemology concur that acquiring knowledge requires surmounting bias, Cartesianism may appear more sanguine about our epistemic prospects. Descartes certainly believed that knowledge of the indexical truth "I exist" is in principle available to every person, regardless of social position. But Cartesianism and feminist standpoint epistemology are on common ground regarding the prospects for surmounting bias.

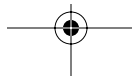
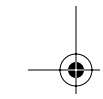


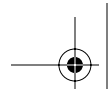
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First, Cartesian epistemology is less optimistic than it may seem. Descartes can agree with Harding's claim that "points of view" are "inescapable," insofar as a point of view is an epistemic perspective on the world (Harding 1993, p. 63). In fact, the inescapability of epistemic perspectives anchors Thesis (2): if I could adopt your perspective, I could grasp your mental states directly, without relying on an introspective grasp of my own mental states. Moreover, Descartes pointedly acknowledges the psychological difficulty of identifying and overthrowing intellectual habits. For instance, at the end of Meditation One, the meditator notes that doubting her previous convictions "is an arduous undertaking, and a kind of laziness brings me back to normal life" (Descartes 1988, p. 15; AT 23). Similarly, in Meditation Two, she finds herself sinking back into former intellectual habits, and observes "But it still appears—and I cannot stop thinking this—that the corporeal thing of which images are formed in my thought, and which the senses investigate, are known with much more distinctness than this puzzling 'I' which cannot be pictured in the imagination" (Descartes 1988, p. 20; AT 29). And there is no reason for Descartes to deny that these habits are ingrained more deeply, and thus harder to shake, in those who have benefited from them—psychologically, materially, or otherwise.

So epistemic individualism is consistent with the claim that those who have profited from bankrupt intellectual habits are especially ill-equipped to recognize and abandon them. Descartes does, however, maintain that doing so is not utterly impossible for them, at least as regards beliefs such as "I exist." Though in this way Cartesianism treats all cognizers as *potential* epistemic equals, the first-person approach may yet acknowledge that occupying a dominant social position can put one at an acute epistemic disadvantage.

Secondly, feminist standpoint epistemology is more optimistic than it may seem. Harding's sophisticated version of standpoint epistemology seems to allow that overthrowing biased intellectual habits is at least possible, even for one who has greatly profited from them. For she claims that we can, on occasion, learn from those in social positions other than our own. This process involves adopting historically underrepresented "standpoints," enabling us to recognize illegitimate generalizations ("we-saying") which masquerade as objective assessments (Harding 1993). Alison Jaggar, another standpoint theorist, also believes that it is possible to abandon biased intellectual habits. This belief is evident in her call to "focus not only on the outer world but also on ourselves and our relation to that world, to examine critically our social location" (Jaggar 1996, p. 184). If it were impossible to overcome intellectual habits which derived from one's social position, critical examination of that position would be pointless. So feminist standpoint theory and Cartesianism can agree that





overcoming bias, though difficult, is crucial and—at least in principle—possible.

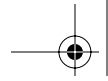
Before turning to Thesis (2), let us review my treatment of feminist objection to Thesis (1). Most feminist criticisms of epistemic individualism turn on denying that there is a genuine, substantive contrast between (allegedly necessary) epistemic priority and (allegedly contingent) psychological priority. They sidestep the genetic fallacy by explaining the source of this illusory distinction, and thus provide a principled basis for denying the distinction, viz., that it depends on illegitimately treating masculine psychological tendencies as features of knowing subjects generally. I have argued that the anti-authoritarian method of the *Meditations* is an attempt to stymie such baseless generalizations. Cartesian methodology dictates that justification (at least as regards meditative conclusions like Theses [1] and [2]) can be achieved only through one's own active engagement, and cannot derive from external authorities. To the objection that the argument for Thesis (1) falls short of Cartesian methodological requirements, I have responded as follows. The meditator cannot, at the risk of ceding epistemic authority ("they-saying"), dismiss her own first-person evidence for the epistemic asymmetry between "the thing undergoing this thinking" and all else. Using this epistemic asymmetry to stipulatively identify the "I," she can endorse Thesis (1) in its unqualified, universal form, without "we-saying." Finally, I argued that Descartes's first-person method may be a valuable antidote to epistemological mistakes, including the generalizations from limited "standpoints," upon which feminist work has rightfully focused attention.



4. Introspectivism

I now turn to the second basic result of the *cogito* which I shall discuss, introspectivism (Thesis [2]). Introspectivism is the view that a proper grasp of others' mental states (including emotional states) must draw on introspective knowledge of one's own mental states. Here is Descartes's case for introspectivism. If it has the result Descartes predicts, the *cogito* shows that the existence of non-mental things, including physical things, is dubitable even while the existence of at least one mental thing is indubitable. The dubitability of the physical is an epistemic feature of *it*, not just a relation between the physical and a particular thinker. No physical thing could be indubitable.⁸ Again using an epistemic asymmetry to underwrite a conceptual distinction, Descartes concludes that those states which the meditator finds indubitable, i.e., mental states, are conceptually distinct from states which cannot be indubitable, including physical states. (Belief may *causally* depend on the physical, of course.) This conceptual distinction between the mental and the physical is a distinction amongst *types*: mental things are type distinct from physical things. (By contrast, the distinction between oneself and other thinkers,



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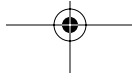
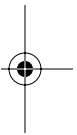
discussed above, is a distinction among *tokens* of a single type.) Given this type difference, it is wrong to assimilate mental states to physical states. Since one cannot introspect anyone else's states, or know them indubitably, to attribute genuinely *mental* states to another one must attribute states conceived on the model of one's own (indubitable) introspective objects.

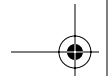
Code terms the introspectivist method of grasping others' mental states "vicarious introspection." On her view, this method risks assuming that all people are alike, and thereby disregards "social-political-cultural-gendered locations, that might make putting oneself in another's place more an act of arrogance than of altruism" (Code 1995, p. 138). This objection parallels the main objection to Thesis (1). While that objection charged that Thesis (1) invalidly generalized from masculine psychological types to a universal epistemic type, Code's objection to Thesis (2) charges that it invalidly generalizes from *one's own* psychological features to others'. The questionable conclusion here is that someone else feels as you yourself would, in her situation.

I argued that the first-person method of the *Meditations* defuses the threat of politically loaded background assumptions by requiring, for its argumentative force, that each person perform the *cogito* herself. Just as each person must establish epistemic individualism for herself, a subject's belief in introspectivism is justified (at least, achieves a level of justification consonant with the meditator's belief) only if the subject has carried out the *cogito* with the same result. There is, however, a pivotal difference between epistemic individualism and introspectivism. While individualism implies only that one's own existence can be known independently of others' existence, introspectivism concerns other persons more directly, in its estimation of what is required to accurately conceive others' mental states.

In fact, I think that Code's concern is well placed. Arrogance can indeed lead someone to believe that he understands what another person is thinking or feeling when in fact he is projecting onto her the feelings which he believes he would have if his situation was, in the respects *he* deems relevant, similar to hers. And this arrogance can have tangible, grievous effects, since our estimation of others' thoughts and feelings guides our behaviour towards them. But this concern does not undermine introspectivism, for the introspectivist thesis is silent regarding what *suffices* for determining others' thoughts and feelings; it states only a *necessary* condition for attributing mental states to others. For this reason, the bare introspectivism under discussion does not run afoul of Code's warning. (This is not an objection to Code, for she does not specifically target this minimal introspectivist thesis.)

By expressing a necessary condition for grasping others' mental states, introspectivism appears to answer other feminist worries. MacKinnon



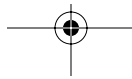


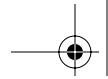
expresses one such worry when she notes that women have historically been epistemic objects, “the to-be-known-about,” while theories of knowledge are the historical province of men.⁹ So-called “objective” investigation construes its targets, in this case women, as *merely* objects: “objectivity is the epistemological stance of which objectification is the social process” (MacKinnon 1987b, p. 150). This line of reasoning construes “objectivity” in a way which makes objectivity about persons precisely opposed to Thesis (2): for MacKinnon, to adopt an objective stance is to attempt to understand a person without conceiving her as a *subject*. The *cogito*’s conceptual distinction between mental states (including emotional states, sensory states, etc.) and physical states dictates that one can understand another person, *qua* subject of mental states, only by proper use of one’s introspective faculty. For it is only through conceiving of others’ states on the model of those one introspects that one can understand her *as* a mental being. This process is difficult at best, and there is no guarantee that it can be carried out in all cases.¹⁰ But the requirement that one engage in it in order to truly grasp another’s thoughts and experiences reinforces MacKinnon’s claim. For it demonstrates why observing others “objectively,” in MacKinnon’s sense, amounts to objectifying them, i.e., denying their subjecthood.

Of course, this minimal introspectivism does not specify which beings have mental states and therefore fall within the scope of this requirement. (Descartes notoriously denied that animals have mental states, but this denial is not implied by the minimal introspectivism expressed in Thesis [2].) Thesis (2) does not say that the introspectivism requirement applies to grasping women’s states; it has no consequences for women unless conjoined with a claim that women are truly mental beings. Feminists have long noted ways in which women have been subtly denied true subjecthood, by being identified with the bodily while men are identified with the cognitive.¹¹ To identify women with the bodily is to fail to meet the introspectivist requirement for understanding women as genuinely *mental* beings, as genuine subjects.

Thesis (2) thus explains how identification with the bodily denies women subjecthood. More generally, Thesis (2) provides a criterion for objectification: to objectify a person is to believe that, or treat her as if, she is devoid of states conceptually similar to one’s own introspected states. This criterion underscores the offensiveness of objectification, and explains how treating women as “other,” relative to masculine cognition, amounts to denial of personhood.

Code is similarly concerned with the consequences of viewing women “objectively.” She claims that there is “no surer way of demonstrating a refusal to know a person *as* a person than observing her ‘objectively’ without taking seriously what her experiences meant to her” (Code 1992, p. 279). Introspectivism requires applying the first-person perspective to



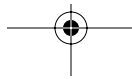
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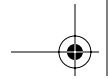
another's states, to truly understand her as a person. But Thesis (2) does not identify what is required for determining someone else's particular mental states; it states only a condition on conceptualizing states *as* mental. Still, introspectivism about mental concepts supports a view in the philosophy of psychology called "Simulation Theory."¹² Simulation theory claims that adequate knowledge of another person's mental states requires imaginatively projecting oneself into her situation—putting oneself in her shoes, as it were. On this view, one can understand another's states only through such imaginative projection, or simulation. Introspectivism supports simulation theory by providing conceptual grounds for denying that mental states are theoretical posits, adequately captured by a third-person characterization. If I am right about this, Thesis (2) helps to explain why we can understand another only by "taking seriously what her experiences meant to her."

Introspectivism is of greater value to some feminist views than to others. It is worth mentioning one theme at the forefront of feminist work in philosophy of science for which introspectivism will not provide support. Some feminists decry what they see as the mission of modern science, namely, conquering nature. They trace the adoption of this goal to a third-person stance vis-à-vis objects of nature, and argue that the proper relation to objects of nature, including non-living things, is a second-person stance. For instance, Vandana Shiva attributes Descartes's belief that scientists should strive to master nature to his "dualism between man and nature" and his conception of nature as "separate from man" (Shiva 1996, p. 283). She recommends an alternative, "participatory" stance towards nature. Thesis (2) denies that the third-person stance towards things capable of mental states is appropriate, but because it states only a necessary condition for understanding others' mental states, it is strictly neutral about how we should conceive items which lack mental states. So, it neither supports nor undermines views like Shiva's.¹³

Finally, let us briefly consider how introspectivism can support feminist work in ethics. In her well-known study of sex differences in moral reasoning, Carol Gilligan argues that girls use empathy, to a greater extent than do boys, in determining how someone should act in a particular morally charged situation (Gilligan 1982). Gilligan finds that girls often evaluate a moral option by imagining what it would be like to experience its consequences for each person affected by the option. Drawing on Gilligan's work, many feminists have commended empathy as a tool in moral reasoning. This view does not commit one to essentialism; Gilligan herself extols the use of empathy in moral deliberation while endorsing Chodorow's psychoanalytic account of gender differences.

Introspectivism can enrich and strengthen views like Gilligan's. (Again, I am not defending any claim about the relation of empathy to moral reasoning; my purpose here is merely to show how those who advocate the



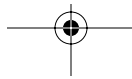
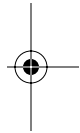


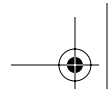
importance of empathy in moral reasoning can draw support from introspectivism.) I now describe in outline how introspectivism can make precise the role of empathy in moral reasoning, and, more generally, can illuminate the moral value of empathy.

In the minimal form under discussion, introspectivism entails that thinking of an entity as capable of thought and/or feeling requires thinking of it as capable of states conceptually similar to those one introspects. The proper exercise of empathy satisfies the introspectivist requirement, for it allows the agent to see others as capable of states conceptually similar to her own. It seems clear that the capacity for thought and/or feeling suffices—regardless of whether it is necessary—to make a being worthy of moral consideration. Thesis (2) can thus explain how the exercise of empathy facilitates the agent's recognition of others as worthy of moral consideration, in that empathy involves conceptualizing the object of empathy as a *subject*, i.e., as a being capable of thought and/or feeling. So the exercise of empathy suffices to allow an agent to conceptualize others as deserving of moral concern. And since sensory states provide as strong a basis for the *cogito* as other sorts of mental state, the argument for Thesis (2) presents no obstacle to using empathy to see that infants and animals are worthy of moral consideration.

The proper exercise of empathy actually demands more than what Thesis (2) requires. Empathy not only allows one to see others as capable of states conceptually similar to one's own, but also helps one to grasp what *particular* thoughts and feelings someone else has. While advocating empathy outruns Thesis (2), introspectivism can nonetheless help to explain the role empathy plays, on Gilligan-style views, in moral reasoning. When one empathizes with another, one takes a first-person stance towards the other's mental states. Empathy involves drawing on a first-person understanding of one's own pain, for instance, to fully appreciate the pain which a proposed action could cause another. Since an agent's ability to evaluate her moral options depends upon her grasp of their consequences for others, empathetic understanding can thereby improve moral decision-making. Now introspectivism implies that mental states are adequately conceived only from the first-person perspective. It therefore supports (though it does not entail) this account, for it helps to explain how empathy can assist an agent in comprehending the likely consequences of an action.

A final way in which empathy may contribute to moral reasoning is by strengthening moral resolve. In allowing an agent to grasp what is sometimes called the "concreteness" of another person (cf. Benhabib 1987), empathy can drive home to an agent the urgency of acting morally, even without altering her judgement about which option is morally preferable. Introspectivism can explain this phenomenon as deriving from conceiving of another's states on the model of one's own. Introspectivist empathy





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can effect a partial transfer of the (often greater) urgency of self-interest to the (often lesser) urgency of other-interest.

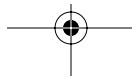
This section has yielded the following results. Introspectivism, in the version discussed here, states a necessary condition for conceiving others as subjects. Because it does not specify sufficient conditions, it is not vulnerable to the charge that it illegitimately assumes that other persons are similar to oneself. The introspectivist requirement provides a useful theoretical criterion for objectification: to objectify a person is to believe that—or treat her as if—she is devoid of states conceptually similar to one’s own introspected states. Finally, introspectivism can explain the importance of empathy for recognizing others as worthy of moral consideration, for making informed moral decisions, and for heightening moral resolve. It can thereby support some key feminist ethical claims.

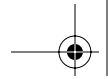
Conclusion

Because their work examining the political sources and implications of traditional philosophical views is of paramount importance, it is crucial that philosophical feminists not neglect any potentially valuable resource. I have argued that two pillars of Cartesianism, which together constitute a “first-person” approach to knowledge of the mind, are not at odds with feminist work and may even support such work. These theses are intimately connected to Descartes’s methodology, in particular his anti-authoritarian epistemic procedure. It may be, as many feminists charge, that others have used the authority of Cartesian views, directly or indirectly, to quell feminist work in philosophy. I hope to have shown that individualism and introspectivism are immune to at least some of these charges. In any case, reliance on Descartes as a philosophical authority is expressly unCartesian.¹⁴

Notes

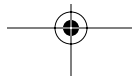
- 1 Some doubt that a Cartesian meditator could be female. It is beyond the scope of this article to address doubts on this score which stem from Cartesian positions other than the two theses at issue. (For instance, it has been suggested that Cartesian dualism prevents women from engaging in intellectual endeavour by relegating them to the corporeal realm.) But I do aim to show that nothing in the two theses at issue rules out a female meditator.
- 2 I follow standard practice in using “female” and “male” to denote biological categories, and “feminine” and “masculine” to denote social categories. The difference between these two distinctions will be important in the discussion of anti-essentialism below.
- 3 In an illuminating discussion, Annette Baier argues that an idea’s clarity and distinctness is relative to whether it is being used for action or for knowledge. On her view, an idea’s clarity and distinctness, relative to action, is *reversely* proportional to its clarity and distinctness relative to knowledge. For instance,

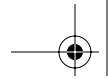




secondary qualities are crucial to guiding action, whereas beliefs about them are apt to be “confused” (Baier 1985).

- 4 Obviously, these characterizations should be refined to exclude incidental implications and entailments. And they should be expanded to include not only states but, perhaps, capacities and dispositions.
- 5 Code observes that feminists are not immune from “we-saying”; “we-saying” also infects those feminist projects which gloss over relevant class and race differences among subjects.
- 6 I am indebted here to Gary Hatfield’s insightful analysis of Descartes’s meditative method. Hatfield notes that a particularly salient disparity between the *Meditations* and spiritual exercises is that “Descartes never makes the search after truth dependent upon the grace of God” (1986, p. 55).
- 7 This characterization of how the meditator conceives others is not quite right, since the meditator herself undergoes other episodes of thinking, e.g., those that occur at different times. At this point, she finds the existence of her past self and her future self dubitable; it is only her current self, the thing undergoing *these* (current) thoughts, which is indubitable. How to best characterize the meditator’s conception of other beings is a thorny issue. What is in the text will suffice for our purposes here.
- 8 Here, in barest outline, is the reasoning for the Cartesian claim that no physical thing could be indubitable. Indubitability stems from the reflexive quality of introspective reference; one can reflexively refer only to states which are type-identical to the referring states, and reference is itself an essentially mental activity. So, the only type of states which could be indubitable are mental states. (For an account of the reflexive nature of self-knowledge, see Gertler 2001 and 2002.)
- 9 MacKinnon makes this observation *a propos* of social science (1987a, p. 57). Compare Code’s criticism of “unidirectional epistemologies,” as objectifying the items known (Code 1995). Since women have traditionally been part of the *known* rather than *knowers*, Code argues, such epistemologies perpetuate existing power inequities between men and women.
- 10 The question of how much justification is required for such knowledge is one which, fortunately, we can put to one side. Perhaps there is a range of justification consistent with knowledge of another person’s mental states, and perhaps this scale is relative, to a degree, upon one’s abilities.
- 11 Feminist theorists have noted various aspects of the bodily with which women have been associated. These include the biological (cf. de Beauvoir 1973; Ortner 1974); the sexual (cf. MacKinnon 1987a); and the aesthetic (cf. Bartky 1990, esp. chap. 3). Bordo quotes Lucius Outlaw as expressing this practice regarding marginalized groups of any sort: “the other folks have the bodies. . . . *I am the mind*” (quoted in Bordo 1992, p. 154).
- 12 For the classic statements of Simulation Theory, see Jane Heal (1986) and Robert Gordon (1986).





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- 13 Descartes himself surely thought that the introspectivist requirement applied only to entities capable of mental states. This view goes beyond Thesis (2), and so is not part of my topic here. In any case, this further position of Descartes's is at odds with the claim that truly understanding objects of nature requires taking a second-person stance towards them, *only* so long as this claim is conjoined with the view that objects of nature are non-mental, non-subjects. Depending on how what Shiva intended in claiming that we can consider the ecological situation "from the perspective of nature," even this further position may be in line with Shiva's view.
- 14 Previous versions of this paper were presented at the Social and Political Philosophy Discussion Group at the College of William and Mary (Fall 1998) and the Pacific Division meeting of the APA (Albuquerque, NM, April 2000). I thank the audiences on both of these occasions, as well as Larry Becker, Laura Ekstrom, Andrew Mills, and two anonymous referees for this journal. Special thanks go to Ann Cudd, who offered excellent comments on the paper at the APA, and Naomi Zack, who provided very helpful written suggestions.

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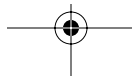
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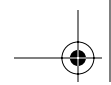
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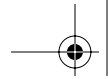
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