

AMY M. SCHMITTER

CARTESIAN SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY?¹
CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY
AND EARLY MODERN PHILOSOPHY

Social epistemology has been experiencing a bit of a boom recently, gaining both in popularity and in the sheer diversity of topics it examines. Social epistemology covers many things: the reliability of testimony, standards for negotiating disagreement, belief-formation by groups and within groups, information distribution across epistemic networks, and so on. But whatever their preferred flavor, most contemporary practitioners maintain that social epistemology represents a fresh start, since “[u]ntil recently, epistemology—the study of knowledge and justified belief—was heavily individualistic in focus.”² Moreover, as Frederick Schmitt and Oliver Scholz point out, “[i]t is a commonplace that mainstream philosophers of the early modern era, above all René Descartes, required knowledge to have an individualist basis” (2010, 3).³ When social epistemologists do recognize an anti-individualist forerunner, they tend to come from outside the “Cartesian” epis-

AMY M. SCHMITTER, PhD, is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Alberta, Co-Editor-in-Chief of *Hume Studies* and Executive Editor of the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*; address for correspondence: 2-70 Assiniboia Hall, Edmonton, AB, Canada T6G 2E7; email: amy.schmitter@ualberta.ca; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8753-064X>.

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² Alvin GOLDMAN and Cailin O’CONNOR in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2019).

³ It is easy to multiply examples. Another is Goldman, who declares: “[e]pistemology has had a strongly individualist orientation, at least since Descartes” (2009, 1). See also C. A. J. COADY (1994, 13).

temological mainstream; for example, both David Hume and Thomas Reid have been singled out for their views on testimony.⁴

Scholars of early modern philosophy, however, may think that social epistemologists seeking forerunners should look a little harder. Issues about testimony, trust in expertise, how to negotiate disagreement, etc., arise fairly frequently in early modern discussions of faith and religious authority.⁵ Considerations congenial to social epistemologists also naturally arise in the philosophy of education, of which there is a robust, if often overlooked, early modern literature, one with a particularly high representation of women (and feminist) philosophers. I will look at a few such cases in the latter parts of this paper. But my main aim here is to make a case that there is much that ought to be interesting to social epistemologists even in their supposed nemesis—Descartes. My case does not rest on claiming that Descartes considers typical social-epistemological issues such as testimony, or divisions of intellectual labor (although I think he sometimes does). Rather I will concede much of the commonplace view, while pressing two subsequent claims: first, although Descartes does indeed present an individualist picture of what counts as knowledge (or at least, *scientific* knowledge), this is not because he is simply ignorant or dismissive of the concerns motivating social epistemologists. There are *reasons* why he commits to individualism. Second, those reasons raise what should be important issues for social epistemology. I will argue for this point largely on grounds that I hope will appeal to social epistemologists—by way of Descartes’s reception by some immediate successors. Even if Descartes himself did not fully exploit the socio-epistemic implications of his thought, they did. And why should we suppose that Cartesian epistemology must be monopolized by what was inside the head of the individual Descartes?

⁴ See, e.g., COADY (1994, 23, 120–130), and GOLDBERG (2010, 144n12). Hume has probably received the lion’s share of attention, with, e.g., two out of five articles in the 2010 issue of *Episteme* on the history of social epistemology devoted to him. However, he typically receives mixed reviews, since his skeptical discussion of miracle reports is commonly understood to eliminate any distinctive role for socially transmitting knowledge through testimony in favor of turning it into another exercise in inductive inference. For this reason, many social epistemologists agree with Coady’s description of Hume as “the archetype of the reductive responder” (1994, 23). However, quite a few Hume scholars disagree with this assessment (see, e.g., TRAIGER in SCHMITT and SCHOLZ [2010]). But that is a topic for another paper.

⁵ For examples, see HOBBS, *Leviathan*, chapters 32 and 37, or SPINOZA, *Theological-Political Treatise*, chapters i–iii.

DESCARTES'S INDIVIDUALIST PICTURES

Descartes's own working relations to his intellectual communities were a mixed bag: he was an enthusiastic letter-writer, but used Marin Mersenne to screen others' access to him. He seems to have made use of the experimental results ("observations") of others, while urging readers to keep their reports to themselves (*Discourse on Method*, Part Six). He sets the *Meditations* as a cozily isolated retreat, but then solicits multiple sets of objections to be published along with his (not always gracious) replies. He welcomes a life in the Netherlands "as solitary and withdrawn as if [he] were in the most remote desert," but then developed a multi-year working relationship, a genuine partnership, with Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia.

But when it comes to his *picture* of how knowledge, or at least theoretical knowledge, should be structured, it looks pretty individualistic. The *Discourse on Method* begins its reflections on reforming human knowledge by remarking "there is not usually so much perfection in works composed of several parts and produced by various different craftsmen as in the works of one man" (AT 6:12, CSM 1:116),⁶ before heading into the metaphor of rebuilding an individual edifice of knowledge, starting from the foundations. Here I focus mostly on the *Discourse* and the *Meditations* for their depictions both of particular instances of knowledge and judgment, and even more, of structured bodies of knowledge, *scientiae*. I do not think that they offer a theory of justification in the typical sense.⁷ Rather, they try to show how to dodge occasions for error, particularly by avoiding careless reliance on prejudices, while pursuing discovery of new certainties. Both show the individualist bent.

The practical means for how to go about getting knowledge in various domains is the main concern of "method." Descartes offers a supposedly general method in the *Discourse*, but I think he presents somewhat different (though related) pictures for different domains in which we may make judgments. One

⁶ I follow the standard convention of citing the Adam & Tannery volumes of Descartes's work, followed by either the translations by Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch, or by Shapiro, unless I provide my own translation.

⁷ For reasons I will not pursue here, I do not think that Descartes offers a truly general theory of justification: even the talk of foundations is more of a picture than a theory (for a contrast, see, e.g., HASAN and FUMERTON [2018]). I also think Descartes offers different pictures for other domains, e.g., of the construction of sciences from principles to particulars in Part Six of the *Discourse*. On this latter point, I differ from Dan Garber's position in, e.g., "Descartes on Knowledge and Certainty: from the *Discours* to the *Principia*," which applies the account of intuition and deduction found in the early *Regulae ad Directionem Ingenii* to explain the inferential structure in Descartes's understanding of reasoning. Some of my reasons for holding otherwise are in Schmitter 2000.

such domain is described by the reforming, foundational project narrated in the *Meditations*, and in a more distanced fashion, in Part Four of the *Discourse*. The picture of foundationally structured knowledge found there plays a very important role in enabling an individual thinker⁸ to engage in further *scientia* and achieve certainty in her clear and distinct perceptions.⁹ But I do not think there is much reason to hold that that picture applies outside the particular project: it doesn't continue to govern epistemic labor after the meditator emerges from the stove-heated room. Descartes may well be committed to the general view that some beliefs are more important for knowledge than others, at least for structuring an individual's thinking and possibilities for scientific knowledge.¹⁰ But that gives no general picture or comprehensive theory of justification: it's not as if every mathematical proof, or every scientific explanation must include "I think" or "God exists" as premises.¹¹ In different arenas, we may appeal to different sorts of reasons to justify our judgments.

⁸ Note that Descartes's first discussion of the "foundations" of knowledge occurs in the *Discourse on Method*, where the metaphor is embedded in a larger metaphor likening human knowledge as a whole to a city—a historically formed, unplanned and difficult-to-navigate city. Indeed, Descartes presents the task of establishing firm foundations as a modest and unassuming project, proper to a private individual's own limited powers and free of grand ambitions. To be sure, Descartes works the metaphor of civil architecture to suggest that it might be desirable to bring the entire *urb* under a single blueprint directed by some epistemic Christopher Wren or Baron Hausmann. That, however, is a dream of order, not an assertion of foundational structure.

⁹ Although I will not argue it here, I suspect that clarity and distinctness are not themselves some specific criteria of justification—in which case (as both Alan GEWIRTH [1943], and Leibniz point out) we would need criteria of clarity and distinctness themselves. Rather they are features of how we stand to some content when we are in possession of sufficient reasons to form a judgment. This seems to be the way that Descartes describes clarity and distinctness in the one passage that offers an account in the *Principles of Philosophy* (AT 8A:22, CSM 1:207–8), discussed further below.

¹⁰ The same can be said for the fruiting tree to which Descartes likens philosophy in the prefatory letter to the *Principles of Philosophy* (see AT 9B:14–15, CSM 1:186). The comparison of the tree's roots to metaphysics is also akin to the foundational model in the *Meditations* and the *Discourse*. However, in other respects, the arboreal picture is quite different, particularly in the value Descartes gives to the fruit-bearing branches.

¹¹ I take it that this is the proper way to understand Descartes's claim in the Second Replies that an atheist mathematician has no right to call even a clear and distinct cognition [*cognitionem*] of the relations among the angles of a triangle an instance of genuine knowledge [*veram scientiam*]. The atheist remains subject to doubts about their own cognitions, but that is not because they must add further premises to their demonstrations. The justification for the mathematician's claim about the angles of a triangle is a geometrical demonstration; the justification for holding that the mathematician's clear and distinct cognition of the demonstration provides trustworthy access to the nature of triangles requires acknowledging God's existence and veracity to underwrite our reliance on innate ideas as a guide to the nature of geometrical objects. The two justifications address different questions: the first justifies a mathematical claim; the second justifies the claim that we can acquire knowledge.

PRACTICAL REASON AND THE OPINIONS OF OTHERS

If that is right, then we may find that there are different roles for social interaction (such as testimony) in the formation and reformation of beliefs. Consider the contrasts that Descartes draws between purely theoretical endeavors and immediately practical reasoning: the latter does not allow the suspension of judgment, or the reviews, enumerations, and other practices of doxastic caution that are available when we reflect in a stove-heated room. This contrast runs throughout Part Three of the *Discourse*, which sketches a “provisional morality” (*une morale par provision*) to live by. It begins with a remarkably conservative maxim:

... to obey the laws and customs of my country, holding constantly to the religion in which by God’s grace I had been instructed from my childhood, and governing myself in all other matters according to the most moderate and least extreme opinions — the opinions commonly accepted in practice by the most sensible of those with whom I should have to live. (AT 6:22–23, CSM 1:122)

Further knowledge may obviate the need for this “provisional morality.”¹² It may also be the case that Descartes is being excessively cautious here, since elsewhere (as in the correspondence with Princess Elisabeth), he says little in favor of deferring to the views of others. Nonetheless, this dictum presents reliance on the opinions of others as a prudential principle for decisions when we lack a clear source of guidance, yet are required to act. Then it seems we are justified in seeking the views of “the most sensible” of our neighbors.

To this, we may add the second maxim: to be “as firm and decisive in my actions as I could, and to follow even the most doubtful opinions, once I had adopted them, with no less constancy than if they had been quite certain [*très assurées*]” (AT 6:24, CSM 1:123).¹³ Again, the dictum is a response to the demands of acting under uncertainty, for which Descartes declares it “a most certain truth [*une vérité très certaine*] that when it is not in our power to discern the truest opinions, we must follow the most probable [and e]ven when no opinions appear more probable than any others, we must still adopt some” (AT 6:24, CSM 1:123). Using an example of a traveler lost in the woods, Descartes holds that it is prudentially

¹² There is some argument about how to understand in what way it is “par provision”; for contrasts, see Michelle le DOEUFF (1989) and Donald RUTHERFORD (2017).

¹³ That Descartes uses the qualifier *assurées* rather than *certaines* is suggestive: such practical opinions may not be capable of true certainty, only an appropriate assurance. In the first maxim, he also states that he was assured (*j’étais assuré*) that nothing could be better than to follow the opinions of the most sensible.

justified simply to pick a path at random and stick to it without second-guessing. By the same token, we can infer that it would be well-advised to seek the advice of locals when, say, one does not know the way to the train station. Of course, one might receive conflicting reports, and there are practical problems in deciding who to count as “most sensible,” for which Descartes offers vague cautionary suggestions of “moderation” and restraining future commitment, which shade into his subsequent maxims concerning self-governance and self-development. But it is telling that the whole account begins with considerations of the epistemics of practical judgments under uncertainty and the advisability of relying on others. It is also telling that Descartes then groups these maxims together with “the truths of faith” (*les vérités de la foi*) as beliefs that will not be subject to the project of hyperbolic doubt (AT 6:28).

DIFFERING STANDARDS FOR THEORETICAL KNOWLEDGE

The stakes change considerably for theoretical pursuits, whether we engage in metaphysics or natural philosophy. Not only is theoretical knowledge leisurely enough that we can “carefully avoid rashness and anticipation” (*éviter soigneusement la précipitation, et la prévention*) (AT 6:18) by engaging in the often time-consuming procedures recommended by method,¹⁴ it also has the luxury to suspend judgment on any particular point where we lack sufficient reason to commit ourselves. The differences between practical reason under pressure to act and theoretical enterprises offer a particularly sharp contrast; however, I think we can find some further variations in the epistemic stakes within different forms of theoretical knowledge, particularly between the natural philosophy that occupies most of Descartes’s time and corpus and the more rarified search for foundational “principles of metaphysics.” Descartes offers a number of points of differences between these two endeavors, particularly the roles they play in our epistemological economy: although it is very important “to have understood [the principles] well once in one’s life,” one need not repeat the exercise often, probably no more than once in a lifetime, since it may be “very harmful to occupy one’s understanding often in meditating on them” (letter to Elisabeth, 28 June 1643, AT 3:695, Shapiro 71).

There also seem to be different epistemic standards appropriate to each: the once-in-a-lifetime foundational project requires hyperbolic certainty. And so it sets out to raze the “foundations” through the special method of hyperbolic doubt,

¹⁴ The descriptions of dividing, ordering, and enumerating in Part Two of the *Discourse* emphasize that there are many steps and a fair amount of repetition.

which equips the meditator to reject all their opinions,” by trying to “find in each of them at least some reason for doubt [*aliquam rationem dubitandi in unaquaque reperero*] (AT 7:18, CSM 2:12), or as Part IV of the *Discourse* puts it, by “reject[ing] as if absolutely false everything in which I could imagine the least doubt.” The *Discourse* depicts this strategy as the direct inverse of the demands of practice [*les mœurs*] (AT 6:31, CSM 1:127). It is also a good deal more stringent than what the more everyday method of Part Two of the *Discourse* commands: “never to accept anything as true if I did not have evident knowledge [*la connue évidemment*] of its truth” (AT 6:18, CSM 1:120). That dictum requires strict, but not hyperbolic carefulness and certainty, something between the epistemic standards available in practical life and those suited to laying foundations; it describes what is appropriate to the non-foundational bodies of knowledge, such natural philosophy and mathematics, that Descartes calls “*scientiae*.” Descartes treats such *scientia* very much as what Thomas Kuhn called “normal science” (Kuhn 2012, 10): it seeks to solve problems within already-established frameworks—or what Descartes *hoped* would become established frameworks. What establishes those frameworks, however, is the foundation-busting-and-then-rebuilding enterprise driven by hyperbolic doubt. It is thus not surprising that the standards for each are rather different. Still, they both share features of an individualist model of knowledge, although perhaps for slightly different reasons.

INDIVIDUALISM IN THE SCIENCES

Descartes’s individualist approach may be most clearly expressed in Part Six of *Discourse on the Method*, when he gives a synopsis of his “normal science” in hopes that his readers would find it merits their financial support. This spurs him into a lengthy consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of sharing his discoveries, and more generally, of intellectual interaction with others. The pitch begins by Descartes describing his reluctance to publish a previously-written treatise (presumably *The World*) detailing “the fundamental principles [*les fondements*] of [his] physics” for fear that it would involve him in controversies that would take away from his time to work (AT 6:68, CSM 1:145). On the one hand, he admits that a bit of wrangling could help both his own and others’ understanding: since “many people are able to see more than one alone, so these others might begin to make use of my discoveries and help me with theirs.” On the other, Descartes argues that bitter experience makes him pessimistic about the alleged benefits:

... it has rarely happened that an objection has been raised which I had not wholly foreseen, except when it was quite wide of the mark. Thus, I have almost never encountered a critic of my views who did not seem to be either less rigorous or less impartial than myself. (AT 6:68–69, CSM 1:146)

Indeed, Descartes presents himself as his own best critic, even while admitting his own fallibility and self-doubt. He dismisses the sort of “disputations practised in the schools” as offering misplaced incentives, with “more effort ... put into establishing plausibility than in weighing reasons for and against.” In short, Descartes considers what might be gained from subjecting his physical principles to the marketplace of ideas and decides that it is not worth the cost to him.

He also argues that publication would not confer much benefit on others. His main reason is that he has not sufficiently developed his physics to put his principles into practice, and so the pressing question is how they could be further developed. And to that, he answers that it is he, in fact, who is best-positioned to bring the project to fruition. His reasons are telling:

I think I can say without vanity that if anyone is capable of making these additions it must be myself rather than someone else — not that there may not be many minds in the world incomparably better than mine, but because no one can conceive something so well, and make it his own [*et la rendre sienne*], when he learns it from someone else as when he discovers it himself [*lorsqu'on l'invente soi-même*]. (AT 6:69, CSM 146)

Now, some of Descartes’s motivation here probably stems from his acute sense of the risks carried by publication. But he is also painting a picture of what constitutes scientific knowledge, a picture that identifies understanding something with making it one’s own and making it one’s own by going through the process of discovering it. For this reason, transferring opinions to others risks degrading them. Even if someone thereby gained some opinions that happened to be true, they would be in no position to know *why* they should be believed to be true—they would lack the kind of justifying understanding given by discovering the truths for oneself.

Descartes goes yet further: relying on others to provide our opinions degrades not only the opinions, but even our naturally clear beliefs about what it is to know something. Sounding a bit like Galileo, Descartes takes a swipe at contemporary followers of Aristotle, who become

somehow less knowledgeable than if they refrained from study, when, not content with knowing everything which is intelligibly explained in their author’s writings, they wish in addition to find there the solution to many problems about which he says nothing and about which perhaps he never thought. (AT 6:70, CSM 1:147)

Parroting ends up cultivating ignorance, in a way Descartes takes to be typical of “mediocre minds,” so lost to epistemic norms that they behave like “a blind man who, in order to fight without disadvantage against someone who can see, lures him into the depths of a very dark cellar.”

These points may help explain Descartes’s rather odd insistence that fully disclosing the principles of his philosophy would be both unwelcome and unnecessary just *because* they are “so very simple and evident that in publishing them I should, as it were, be opening windows and admitting daylight into that cellar where they have gone down to fight” (AT 6:71, CSM 1:147). Those who want merely the appearance of knowledge will rebel against principles that undermine false appearances, while those who truly seek knowledge should figure out the principles for themselves and should be *able* to do so. And so, for those who truly seek knowledge, “I need tell them nothing more than I have already said in this discourse. For if they are capable of making further progress than I have made, they will be all the more capable of discovering for themselves everything I think I have discovered” (AT 6:71, CSM 1:147).

INDIVIDUALISM AS A TOOL OF EPISTEMIC EGALITARIANISM

On the one hand, Descartes sets up a fairly stringent standard for scientific knowledge in this sense: any knowledge worthy of the name must be made one’s own through discovery. On the other hand, he also maintains that what counts as knowledge in this sense is something accessible to any mind that works methodically and in good faith, without being self-hobbled by epistemological prejudices. This latter claim is part of what Amélie Rorty has dubbed Descartes’s “epistemological egalitarianism” (Rorty 1996).¹⁵ The egalitarianism may remain a hope more than anything else, but it expresses Descartes’s view that to have a mind is to have it and its powers whole and entire, such that:

... the power of judging well and of distinguishing the true from the false — which is what we properly call ‘good sense’ or ‘reason’ — is naturally equal in all men, and consequently ... the diversity of our opinions does not arise because some of us are more reasonable than others but solely because we direct our thoughts along different paths [*conduisons nos pensées par diverses voies*] and do not attend [*considérons*] to the same things. (AT 6:1–2, CSM 1:111)

¹⁵ By borrowing her term, I do not mean to signal that I am adopting everything she says about it. For one, I am not making her careful distinction between epistemological abilities and capabilities, see RORTY (1996, 35).

The difference that makes a difference among epistemic agents has to do with how we steer our thoughts and to what objects we direct them. Ironically, the supposed equality of our natural faculties turns into a weapon of criticism for Descartes, with the sharp edge particularly turned on those who would have been better off “if they refrained from study,” since it has steered their natural reason into dead-ends and dark cellars. One of the charges laid against the latter-day followers of Aristotle is that they disingenuously disregard our native sense of how to exercise the power to judge well and to distinguish the true from the false in favor of maintaining that *scientia* is only open to those with specialized knowledge, occult concepts, or familiarity with esoteric techniques. That is a view Descartes frequently derides. Even for arts of poetry or oratory, those “with the strongest reasoning and the most skill at ordering their thoughts so as to make them clear and intelligible are always the most persuasive, even if they speak only low Breton” (AT 6:7, CSM 1:114).

Similarly, the “keys to his algebra,” as he explains to Princess Elisabeth, require simplicity and accessibility:

I always make a point, when investigating a problem of geometry, to make it be the case as much as possible that the lines for which I am searching be parallel or intersect at right angles, and I consider no other theorems except that the sides of similar triangles have similar proportions between them, and that in right triangles, the square of the base is equal to the two squares of the sides. ... (letter to Elisabeth, November 1643, AT 4:38–39)

Descartes insists on using only simple geometrical theorems and drawing lines that are parallel or perpendicular to each other. Doing otherwise, he states, tends to obscure the construction, or else to reduce to his own approach. What seems most important to him is that we keep all the tools we are using, including theorems, “strongly present to the mind [*fort presente en l’esprit*].” For this reason, his denial that we need anything other than properly directed thinking goes hand-in-hand with the view that knowledge requires that we figure things out for ourselves.

INDIVIDUALISM AS AN IDEAL OF UNIFICATION

I think there is another element to Descartes’s individualism about *scientia*—the work he thinks is done by its being taken in by a single, unified perceiver. Descartes’s early notes collected as *Regulae ad Directionem Ingenii* start off with a very general claim about the “sciences” (*scientiae*) and their differences from practical arts (*arte*):

For the sciences as a whole [*scientiæ omnes*] are nothing other than human wisdom [*sapientia*], which always remains one and the same [*quæ semper una et eadem manet*], however different the subjects to which it is applied, it being no more altered by them than sunlight is by the variety of the things it shines on. (AT 10:360, CSM 1:9)

The *Regulae* is an early work, and I do not wish to suggest that Descartes retains the doctrines worked out there.¹⁶ However, I do think that he maintains something of the picture of *scientia* as a unity consolidated by being taken in by a mind. Something similar can be seen in the much later *Principles of Philosophy* 1, §45, where Descartes gives his most expansive account of what he means by clarity and distinctness:

I call a perception “clear” when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind [*quæ menti attendenti præsens et aperta est*] — just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye’s gaze [*oculo intuenti præsentia*] and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility [*aperte*]. I call a perception “distinct” if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear. (AT 8A:22, CSM 1:207–8)

To be sure, this passage treats what makes a single perception a bit of knowledge, whereas Rule I of the *Regulae* concerns all the sciences [*scientiæ omnes*]. But I do not think this is a relevant difference in this case: what makes something known (in the way that things should be known in the sciences) is the way it is taken in by the attentive knower, the mind. And what unifies the object of knowledge is how it is taken in. For this reason, it is natural to think of this mind as single—akin to a lone eye [*oculo* is singular] that gathers in what is open and salient in its visual field. The model of attentive, focused vision does not readily lend itself to thinking of the knower as collective in any way. The result is an individualist picture of an agent who unifies *scientia* through its mental activity.

I suspect that this picture of the unified, single mind is best understood as a regulative ideal for scientific knowledge.¹⁷ And in fact, Descartes does not think

¹⁶ In particular, I do not think that he retains the conception of “simple natures,” or of the mental acts of “intuition” and “deduction” that he develops in the first group of rules. This is a subject of long dispute; for my reasons, see SCHMITTER (2000).

¹⁷ That is something like what Kant called a regulative maxim of reason in *Critique of Pure Reason*, e.g., KVR A680-683/B708-711. Doing so requires only that we think the systematic unity of knowledge and science *as if* it were the property of a tightly unified, single thinker; we can simultaneously acknowledge that most knowledge has been historically and empirically formed “from the mere confluence of aggregated concepts” (Kant [1997, 692], KVR A835/B863). The connection between the unity of sciences and of philosophy and the maxims of reason are further worked out in the chapter on the “architectonic of pure reason,” especially A832-840/ B860-868.

that all the work that goes into building a science must be done by the same individual. Part Six of *Discourse* acknowledges the practical limits on what one person can do to carry out the promise of his principles into particulars:

True, as regards observations [*expériences*] which may help in this work, one man could not possibly make them all. But also he could not usefully employ other hands than his own, except those of artisans, or such persons as he could pay, who would be led by the hope of gain (a most effective motive) to do precisely what he ordered them to do. (AT 6:72, CSM 1:148)

What Descartes wants is paid, non-matriculating lab assistants, who will work under his sole direction. In the face of his own limitations as a finite mind, his recourse is to seek extra hands and eyes, while putting up barriers to prevent “unwelcome visitors from wasting his free time.” As a model of social epistemic agency, it is a rigidly hierarchical one, tightly consolidated under the director’s attentive eye. The same may be said of Francis Bacon’s conception in *New Atlantis*.¹⁸ But I suspect that in Descartes’s case, this is largely because he retains a picture of scientific knowledge as unified in a single, executive mind.

PREJUDICES VS INDIVIDUALISM AS A TOOL OF REFORM

I now want to turn to Descartes’s central reformist project—the once-in-a-lifetime meditation on the principles of metaphysics that rebuilds the foundations of our thought. Here, I suggest, Descartes addresses the social transmission of beliefs, albeit subtly. But he does so not to develop a theory of their reliability, but to analyze how they spread various errors, in particular *prejudices*, and in even more particular, the prejudices that can block the development of *scientiae*. The Fifth Replies characterize prejudices as “opinions which we have continued to accept as a result of previous judgments that we have made” (AT 9A:204, CSM 2:270). However, it is clear that they are not justified by those previous judgments. The sense in which they are the result of previous judgments is causal: our previous (unjustified) judgments have committed us to various opinions that they fail to support; we are enmeshed in a tangle of unjustified judgments.¹⁹ As we will see,

¹⁸ See further “Experiment, Community and the Constitution of Nature in the Seventeenth Century,” in GARBER (2001).

¹⁹ For further analysis of Descartes’s conceptions of prejudices as commitments, see SCHMITTER (2018).

the prejudices that most occupy Descartes concern judgments about how judgments should be formed—epistemological meta-judgments buried in the way we think.

Consider the beginning of the First Meditation, where the meditator tries to find belief-shattering reason for doubt by going “straight for the basic principles on which all my former beliefs rested.” The principles concern the source of my most tenacious beliefs: “[w]hatever I have up till now accepted as most true” (AT 7:18, CSM 2:12). And the source I had relied on most was reception “either from the senses or through the senses [*vel a sensibus, vel per sensus*].” Once identified, the meta-belief about reliance on the senses is revealed as mere prejudice: since “from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once [*hos autem interdum fallere deprehendi, ac prudentiæ est nunquam illis plane confidere qui nos vel semel deceperunt*].” Ultimately, of course, the attack leads to the first hyperbolic doubt by which the possibility of dreaming undermines relying on beliefs about present particulars. But let me draw our attention to the initial formulation that focuses on what comes “from the senses or through the senses.” The first preposition, *a* (*ab*), attributes a kind of agency to the senses, as if they were the sender of what I receive. But the second, *per*, describes them only as a means of transmission, a channel, rather than that which brings it about. There is little to go on to decipher this doubling of prepositions (although they do not appear to be appositive). But if “through the senses” indicates information transmitted from elsewhere, it should comprise what is heard or read, such as reports of beliefs and opinions, or testimony. What follows may reinforce this reading: after catching them in error (*fallere deprehendi*), the meditator cautions that we should never fully trust (*plane confidere*) in those who have deceived us even once (*illis ... qui nos vel semel deceperunt*). The language is vivid and personified: the senses (or what comes through them) appear faithless confidants. It may be that Descartes is simply using the colorful language of a turn of phrase and referring only to the senses, but it seems as if he is repeating an aphorism that speaks of persons: “those who [*illis ... qui*] have deceived us even once.” If so, then what we are told comes under the scope of doubt in the First Meditation.

However, when the meditator rehearses their doubts in the Sixth Meditation recapitulation, there is no trace of the view either that the senses themselves give testimony or that they are conduits for the testimony of others. The meditator reconsiders all the things, “as perceived by the senses, that I had supposed to be true and for what reasons I had supposed them to be true” (AT 7:74), in order to show how slight a basis they provided for subsequent beliefs, and how carelessly I formed judgments about them. When considering what came from or through

the senses, the meditator considers only an attenuated and thoroughly depopulated environment: “I sensed this body was situated among many other bodies which could affect it in various favourable or unfavourable ways; and I gauged the favourable effects by a sensation of pleasure, and the unfavourable ones by a sensation of pain” (AT 7:74, slightly modified from CSM 2:51). From this slim basis, the meditator recounts leaping to a number of familiar, “common-sense,” but still inept and inapt beliefs.

The review in Meditation Six thus seems to present a rather different interpretation of the nature and source of the prejudices identified earlier. For one, it restates the meta-belief initially targeted by Meditation One’s doubts and now expresses it as the product of the meditator’s own act of self-deception: “In this way I easily convinced myself that I had nothing at all in the intellect which I had not previously had in sensation [*facile mihi persuadebam nullam plane me habere in intellectu, quam non prius habuissem in sensu*]” (AT 7:75, CSM 2:52). However, this restatement also phrases the content of the prejudice anew, and does so in a way that clearly alludes to scholastic Aristotelian empiricism: *nullam ... in intellectu ... non prius ... in sensu* is as much a slogan as if Descartes had found it printed on a tee-shirt. In this way, the Sixth Meditation reframes the tale of the meditator’s previous, unstable conviction about the source of worldly knowledge so that a standard and unmistakable²⁰ scholastic doctrine appears the product of a solitary individual’s careless belief formation. That the slogan is so prominent, however, means that Descartes is not trying to cover up the relation of the prejudice to scholastic beliefs about concept- and belief-formation; he is offering a kind of explanation for how such beliefs could arise and gain acceptance. They accord with common-sensical, though still careless, judgments. As such, what appears *from* the senses is reinforced from what we receive *through* the senses. Our epistemic disabilities thus plague us not solely because we were children before we were grown, but also because conventional wisdom transmits prejudices.

In this context, the individualist bent of Descartes’s model of knowledge takes on a radical bent: it enables us to trust the epistemic norms we find in ourselves and to work through knowledge claims for ourselves. Ultimately, it makes clear and distinct perception accessible to any mind that operates according to its own principles and in good faith. Indeed, it makes such perception by a single mind a sign of truth, capable of overturning prejudices—despite the weight of common-sense, inherited views around us. And so the various individualist elements that

²⁰ Gassendi picks up on it as a familiar maxim in the Fifth Set of Objections (AT 7:267, CSM 2:186).

gave Descartes's thought about *scientia* its egalitarian flavor can serve as tools of reform by empowering those excluded by the epistemic *status quo*.

LATER RECEPTION: THE INTERPRETATION OF PREJUDICES AS HEARSAY

These may seem like pretty broad claims to advance on the backs of just a few, perhaps ambiguous passages in *Meditations*. I think that they find corroboration in other places in Descartes.²¹ But now I want to provide a different sort of evidence that this is a plausible way to read Descartes by looking at someone who *did* read Descartes this way: François Poulain de la Barre, who developed the Cartesian notion of “prejudice” into what we might call a “social erratology,” and in so doing, brings out some of the latent reformist and even liberatory elements of Cartesian epistemology.

Poulain published three works of remarkably radical feminist analysis and social criticism in the three years from 1673 to 1675;²² the first two, *De l'égalité des deux sexes* (henceforth *Equality*), and *De l'éducation des dames* (henceforth *Education*) explicitly adopt Cartesian concepts, claims and techniques. The *Education* presents itself as an exercise in Cartesian method, bearing the full title *On the Equality of the two Sexes: A Physical and Moral Discourse, where one sees the importance of overcoming prejudices*. Poulain proposes that he will show the method's usefulness by way of a kind of case study of inherited prejudice, namely, the opinion of the inequality of the sexes.

Poulain says his aim in this case study is to induce his readers “to doubt [that] they were taught well,” particularly “if they were educated according to traditional methods [*la Méthode vulgaire*],” and thereby to induce them “to wish to discover the truth themselves [*par eux-mêmes*]” (2013, 119). The prejudice of sexual inequality, he declares, is “an opinion as ancient as the world, as widespread as the earth and as universal as the human race.” Because the view is so venerable and widespread, showing that it is built on sand should be especially persuasive: “those who are learned may eventually be convinced that they must make their

²¹ Quite a bit of his correspondence shows Descartes to be seeking an explanation of why inherited beliefs, particularly about the primacy of the senses as a source of knowledge, maintain a tenacious grip on our conviction, despite their discrepancies with our innate ideas (which forces their supporters to resort to occult and mysterious concepts and claims). See, e.g., to Mersenne, 28 January 1641; to Hyperaspites, August 1641; to Voetius, May 1643.

²² They are *De l'égalité des deux sexes* (1673), henceforth *Equality*, *De l'éducation des dames* (1674), henceforth *Education*, and *De l'excellence des hommes, contre l'égalité des sexes* (1675), henceforth *Excellence*. The first is the most obviously Cartesian, and the last the most ironic.

own judgements about things when they have examined them and, if they wish to avoid being deceived, that they should not trust the opinions or sincerity of others.” And in fact, Poulain demolishes it within a few paragraphs of introducing it, by applying the Cartesian “criterion of truth”: “not to accept anything as true unless it is based on clear and distinct ideas” (2013, 120). On the basis of this criterion, Poulain boldly declares the equality of the sexes.²³

Here I am interested in how the criterion enables the more modest claim that the opinion of inequality is “based on prejudice and popular belief.” Poulain also looks to Descartes for his notion of prejudice, since he holds that “none has better discussed prejudice nor countered it more convincingly” (2002, 242). But when he gives a full account of what he means, he introduces some intriguing twists:

... by the words prejudice, preoccupation, etc., we mean judgments made rashly and without examination, or sentiments, opinions, maxims embraced without discernment. In all situations in which we speak against opinion, and in which some evil effect is attributed to it that we think must be got rid of, this word signifies a sentiment into which one has entered simply on hearsay and on the authority of one person or of several, without being able to understand the reason why it is good or bad, true or false, except that one has heard someone say it is thus. (2002, 141)

So Poulain picks up on a number of Cartesian motifs about the need to avoid deception by examining one’s beliefs, along with the emphasis on thinking for oneself. But he embeds these claims in an explicitly social analysis: the spread of prejudices stems from teaching, particularly “common” methods of teaching, prejudices are identified with popular beliefs, and most importantly of all, prejudiced opinions result from hearsay backed up by social authority.

The *Equality* analyzes the notion of prejudice by examining how its target prejudice is situated within pervasive social customs and widely disseminated (though false) beliefs. Prejudice is the result of habit; indeed, it is itself a habit of thought and evaluation that has become entrenched through a kind of carelessness and because it fits familiar experience (2013, 124). Most importantly, we have a prejudice in favor of habits themselves: “if some practice is well established, then we think that it must be right” (2013, 125). So, prejudices are inherently conservative; they reflect power relations and social privilege and serve to preserve the customs from which they arise. Indeed, they bestow an aura of normative authority on entrenched practices, on customs. Since Poulain explicitly identifies the source of opinions in hearsay, the practices and habits that “we think ... must

²³ Ultimately, his main argument stems from a Cartesian conception of the nature of mind, from which “it follows that the mind has no sex” (2013, 157). For further, see REUTER (2019).

be right” include what people say. Indeed, the more some opinion is repeated, the more it will accrue credence. Conventional wisdom appears wisdom simply by being conventional. And thus it seems a sound epistemic strategy to be especially suspicious of any received view, simply because it is received, and thus probably constitutes a prejudice to be resisted.²⁴

EDUCATION AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS FOR BECOMING AN INDIVIDUAL

In a number of places, Poulain gives an interesting, collectivist turn to one of the most individualist parts of Descartes’s epistemology: the imperative to discover things for oneself as criterial for knowledge. Most importantly, Poulain reinterprets Descartes’s first-personal project of meditating on the foundations of my thinking and nature to construct what he calls the “science of ourselves [*de nous-mesmes*]” (2013, 161).²⁵ Not only does Poulain take this science to be foundational, it is also supposed to unify the sciences, and thus explain the applicability of the same methods in various domains: it is, Poulain insists, the “only one science in the world, ... of which all other sciences are mere applications” (2013, 161). In the conversations dramatized in the *Education*, various characters endorse the claim that our prejudices both stem from failing to heed the science of ourselves and draw us away from it. Poulain works the contrast between prejudices and the corrective of self-knowledge as a matter of external distractions, and a truly knowable and accessible interiority.²⁶ Consider the following from the character of Eulalia:

It is perfectly commonplace to say of those who err through presumption or laziness that they do not know themselves,” said Eulalia. “Since the world is eternally subject to these faults, it seems to me that the precept [know thyself] intended to correct them will also be eternal. But what absolutely convinces me it is true, apart from the approval of the philosophers, is that I can’t refuse to accept it. For if there is one thing we have to know it is ourselves, and it is clear that our knowledge is organized in such a way that if what is within us is closer to us, then that must take precedence over what is farther away.” (2002, 210)

Now, in talking about this self-investigation as the “science of ourselves,” Poulain also describes it as a solitary venture: “The difficulty about shutting ourselves up

²⁴ For further analysis of how Poulain thinks prejudices function, see SCHMITTER (2018), especially pages 4–7.

²⁵ In later passages, Clarke translates “*la science de nous-mesmes*” simply as “self-knowledge”; see CLARKE (2013, 170).

²⁶ In this respect, the “science of ourselves” takes on the role innate ideas play in Descartes.

within ourselves, ... is that it requires us to withdraw into a solitude that seems all the more terrifying since we only see and feel ourselves, speak of ourselves and by ourselves" (2002, 211). Oxymoronically, then, we seem to withdraw into solitude *together*, or at least with others who are like us. But the talk of solitude might be a bit misleading: Poulain is not so much opposing "me" and "us," as he is drawing a contrast between looking inward, so as to "understand the nature and variety of the principles of which we are constituted" (2002, 212), and remaining immersed in the sensible, external world. The contrast is thus between ourselves and the "*they*." In the latter case,

the contact the mind keeps with external things draws it so much outside itself that it has neither the leisure nor the inclination to reenter itself, and its constant preoccupation with the same external things for the conservation of the body keeps it bound to them, so that in its preoccupation it even forgets what it is. (2002, 211)

The inward turn gives us insight into our natures, but as a nature that is shared, that constitutes *ourselves*. The main reason this turn counts as solitary is that we cannot look for guidance by turning outwards, that is, by looking to experience for examples to imitate. As Eulalia suggests, "... example plays an important role, and ... if the men we live among and learn from speak and think about external things, we are inclined to imitate them in this respect as in everything else" (2002, 211). The failure to practice the sort of self-examination that leads to the science of ourselves means we remain immersed in the customs and habits of thought that surround us; that, in turn, reinforces prejudices of all sorts, including those about ourselves, and so we have a particularly vicious, socially reinforced feedback loop of error and ignorance.

However, as the conversations that make up the *Education* attest, the inward, self-examining turn that allows us to gain self-knowledge *can* be supported by others who also engage in self-examination. We must, of course, do the work of such self-examination ourselves; others cannot simply give us the results of the science of ourselves. But just as others may practice habits and transmit prejudices that block our self-investigation and self-knowledge, so too can they behave in ways that encourage us to undertake the science of ourselves for ourselves. That is, there are social-epistemological conditions that can empower an individual to learn to think for herself. Were there not, Poulain's entire work on education would be futile, since it aims to "form the minds" of both teachers and students (2002, 141).

Indeed, the difference between supportive and frustrating environments for forming the mind of the young is a theme in several sections of the *Education*, illustrated particularly by the experiences related by its youngest character,

Eulalia. She narrates several instances of intellectual repression and coercion, and her resistance against them (2002, 153–55, 204–5). Still, they do not leave her unscathed; Eulalia has to learn confidence in her own abilities. Much of the *Education* is devoted to the preparation of Eulalia, to a kind of pre-education that readies her to learn for herself. Indeed, it is through her interaction with the other characters that she comes to trust her own reason: “I gather from what you say,” said Eulalie, “that in order to keep going to the very end, I have to be convinced that I have sufficient reason and intelligence to do so, and I have to keep telling myself that I have” (2002, 187).

The Fifth Conversation of the *Education* moves past the preparatory stage, laying out a reading plan, heavy on Descartes and Cartesian philosophers, for Eulalia (and presumably, any of its readers who want to learn to think for themselves). Eulalia then asks a somewhat ironically phrased question: “Since you want us to be able to justify our behavior,” said Eulalia, “please tell me what I should answer if someone asks me why I prefer the Cartesian to other philosophies” (2002, 242). Stasimachus’s answer emphasizes the autodidactic features of Cartesian epistemology:

You remember that in our conversations we have seen that the greatest enemy of truth is prejudice and that we must rid ourselves of it to be happy and learned. We have also seen that almost all of us have enough reason and good sense to seek the truth, that we have to begin our search within ourselves, and that we consider that we have found it if, when we consider things carefully, we have formed clear and distinct ideas about them. From all this we should conclude that the best philosophy is the one whose methods and principles conform most closely to these maxims. I know of no one who does so better than Descartes. ... (2002, 242–43)

While emphasizing the role of one’s own reason and good sense in self-examination, Descartes’s works can support the self-developing mind in this process, if only in the sense of removing obstacles and dead ends. It is, however, important that it be approached in the right way:

But please note that I am not claiming Descartes is infallible or that everything he proposed is true and unproblematic, or that one has to follow him blindly, or that others couldn’t find something as good or even better than he has left us. All I am saying is that I believe him to be one of the most reasonable philosophers we have, whose method is the most universal and the most natural, the one that most closely conforms to good sense and the nature of the human mind, and the one most likely to distinguish the true from the false even in the works of the one who is their author. (2002, 243)

We are not supposed to rely on Cartesian philosophy as *testimony*—reports from others that we are in no position to independently verify—but as stimuli to inward self-examination that leads to the science of ourselves.

Unfortunately, as Poulain's characters admit, we are often surrounded by other people who hold on to their prejudices tenaciously, even violently: they "do not want to be undeceived, and it's foolish to try. They are determined to stick blindly to the opinions they have held since childhood; they make it a virtue to hang on to them, whatever truths are suggested to them" (2002, 248). Indeed, Stasimachus paints those who are "slaves to opinion" as positively dangerous to anybody who seeks to think differently and particularly to think for themselves. In such circumstances, an individualist strategy is the only recourse, even if it is not ideal:

We have to study for ourselves alone and as if we were alone in the world, think to the best of our ability because we do not think as well as we would like to. We have to remain in society because we can't divorce ourselves from people completely, but we shouldn't show off our intelligence too blatantly or reason constantly in their presence, because they will find us trying. (2002, 248–49)

The work ends on a rather somber, although still hopeful note, as the characters consider how they can identify fellow members of the epistemic resistance. Even more, they propose to establish their own cell: as Poulain narrates, "they resolved to form a little society, to meet as often as possible and to follow the guidelines they had established, to celebrate together the freedom of the mind that is one of life's joys and which distinguishes those who value it from the vulgar, self-preoccupied multitude." (2002, 251)

So, on the one hand, Poulain develops Descartes's account of prejudice to suggest a thoroughly social theory of error and its propagation. On the other, he picks up on what seem the most individualist elements of Descartes's thinking, the demand for self-discovery, the conception that justification requires having full and present possession of reasons to believe, and the unification of thinking by the unified mind as a model for knowledge. Yet this is a model expressed in the "science of ourselves," and as we have seen, that binds those committed to it into a select society. What I think explains these features are the twin thoughts, first, that in those domains where it is appropriate (i.e., *scientia*), people should aspire to an ideal of knowledge as an individual, self-possessed, self-developed, self-justifying activity, and second, that such aspirations can be either enabled or inhibited by social conditions. When those social conditions reinforce epistemic prejudices, invidious beliefs about what knowledge is like and who can attain it, it becomes much more difficult to deploy the resources that already lie in one's own

nature to judge well and to distinguish the true from the false. That is, I maintain, a Cartesian thought.

It is also, I suggest, a fairly widespread thought among early modern epistemologists, particularly those who study issues of “method.” Although less obviously Cartesian than Poulain, Mary Astell seems to share some of the same concerns and a great deal of respect for Descartes (2002, 82). Unlike Descartes and Poulain, she sees a significant and inescapable role for testimonial knowledge, and more generally, for a kind of social division of knowing labor in what she calls “Faith,” which “is a Dependence on the Credit of another, in such matters as are out of our View” (2002, 151). Yet she holds it to be capable of as great a certainty as any other form of knowledge (2002, 150–51).

At the same time, she sees “custom” as one of the highest barriers individuals (particularly women) faced to the development of virtue and a kind of epistemic agency: “Ignorance and a narrow Education, lay the Foundation of Vice, and Imitation and Custom rear it up. Custom, that merciless torrent that carries all before” (2002, 69). Indeed, custom comes more and more to be the central problem: “‘Tis Custom therefore, that Tyrant Custom, which is the grand motive to all those irrational choices which we daily see made in the World, so very contrary to our present interest and pleasure, as well as to our Future” (2002, 69–70).

Astell seems to focus on custom because she conceives it to work specifically on our wills, which Astell understands (on broadly Cartesian grounds) to be indispensable to the conduct of both action and understanding. Custom often appears more a matter of practices (e.g., customs of dress) than of beliefs, but cognition and volition work together, and habits of volition are particularly tenacious: “As Prejudice fetters the Understanding so does Custom manacle the Will, which scarce knows how to divert from a Track which the generality around it take, and to which it has itself been habituated” (2002, 139). Indeed, prejudices can only gain purchase because we are not using our will properly by restricting it to what we see clearly and distinctly, or at least with certainty. It is indeed a tyrant, and because of custom, social practices can deform and distort every aspect of an individual’s moral and epistemic development.

Astell goes well beyond Poulain in trying to think through the ways in which we can counter its effects on individuals. Whereas Poulain spins a tale of four intelligent people meeting regularly in the garden of a private house, Astell’s “serious proposal” is the founding of a “female monastery,” or “religious retirement,” the advantages of which she lays out in Part One of her *Serious Proposal to the Ladies*. Her main selling point is that such retirement “helps us to mate Custom and delivers us from its Tyranny” (2002, 94), particularly by replacing the un-

thinking customs of the social world with the carefully constructed and examined practices of the retirement. Part Two of *A Serious Proposal* turns from the setting for education and self-development to offer “some more minute directions” (2002, 126), which constitutes a method “for the improvement of [women’s] minds.” It is many times longer than Part One, covering everything from syllogistic inference to tips on how to govern the passions. Astell envisions a thoroughgoing education and self-makeover that will equip women to function as independent moral and epistemic agents, as well as future educators of others. Her method is devoted to building individual epistemic and moral agency and responsibility. But as the structure of her work shows, social conditions can either undermine self-development or provide soil for it to flourish.

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CARTESIAN SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY?

Summary

Many contemporary social epistemologists take themselves to be combatting an individualist approach to knowledge typified by Descartes. Although I agree that Descartes presents an individualist picture of scientific knowledge, he does allow some practical roles for reliance on the testimony and beliefs of others. More importantly, however, his reasons for committing to individualism raise important issues for social epistemology, particularly about how reliance on mere testimony can propagate prejudices and inhibit genuine understanding. The implications of his views are worked out more fully by some of his immediate successors; I examine how François Poulain de la Barre, and (briefly) Mary Astell analyze the social conditions for epistemic agency in a Cartesian vein.

Keywords: René Descartes; François Poulain de la Barre; Mary Astell; epistemological individualism; prejudice; epistemological egalitarianism; testimony; method.

KARTEZJAŃSKA EPISTEMOLOGIA SPOŁECZNA? WSPÓŁCZESNA EPISTEMOLOGIA SPOŁECZNA A WCZESNA FILOZOFIA NOWOŻYTNA

Streszczenie

Wielu współczesnych epistemologów społecznych uważa, że tocząc batalię z indywidualistycznym podejściem do wiedzy, walczy tym samym z podejściem do wiedzy opisanym przez Kartezjusza. Choć wypada się zgodzić, że Kartezjusz przedstawia indywidualistyczny obraz wiedzy naukowej, niemniej trzeba dodać, że wskazuje on na istotne praktyczne funkcje odnoszenia się do świadectw i przekonań innych osób. Jednakże zrozumienie racji Kartezjusza za zaangażowaniem się w indywidualizm pozwala nam na identyfikację kluczowych wyzwań, z jakimi spotka się epistemologia społeczna, m.in., że poleganie na świadectwach innych może propagować uprzedzenia oraz hamować autentyczne zrozumienie. Implikacje zawarte u Kartezjusza zostały opracowywane i rozwinięte przez niektórych z jego bezpośrednich spadkobierców. W prezentowanym tekście zostanie przedstawione, jak np. François Poulain de la Barre oraz w pewnym skrócie przez Mary Astell analizują uwarunkowania społeczne kształtujące podmiot epistemiczny rozumiany w duchu Kartezjusza.

Słowa kluczowe: René Descartes; François Poulain de la Barre; Mary Astell; indywidualizm epistemologiczny; uprzedzenie; egalitaryzm epistemologiczny; świadectwo; metoda.