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**SOLITUDE  
AND  
THE BIRTH OF MODERNITY**



**SOLITUDE AND THE BIRTH OF MODERNITY**

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# SOLITUDE AND THE BIRTH OF MODERNITY

## I. The Problem of Solitude

“Little do men perceive what solitude is, and how far it extendeth”

FRANCIS BACON, *Of Friendship*

Modernity usually describes itself as an emancipatory process by which individuality managed to free itself, and its creativity, from the chains of hierarchical communitarianism, tradition and dogma. A sort of triumphalism is at work here: it is implied that the aspiration to autonomy and individual freedom has won the battle against subordination and obedience. But if we look at the works of such ‘founding fathers’ of modernity as Montaigne, Descartes, Pascal and Hobbes, we can notice that the triumphal note is far from being dominant; on the contrary, their discourse is full of suggestions of disappointment (with human affairs and human resources), reluctance (to co-operation and dialogue), and retreat (from the public scene). It is not the discourse of emancipation that dominates their approaches; what seems to be characteristic is rather *the sense of crisis* and a *tendency to react* to what appeared to be a disappointing, and even hopeless, state of affairs, in society, moral life and the world of ideas.

It is thus appropriate to ask: was modernity really a triumphant march, or rather a complex *defensive reaction* to an ample crisis? Is modernity rooted in high aspirations to autonomy, or rather in some sort of *retreat* from a public landscape increasingly hard to bear?

Such questions become significant when one focuses upon some specific aspect. Take, for instance, the much-praised modern individualism. Was individualism an essentially and purely emancipatory movement, a heroic attempt of the modern mind to achieve independence? The heroic mood is hardly present in the thought of Montaigne, Pascal or Hobbes. It seems more adequate to speak of an *anti-heroic, defensive attitude of retreat*, betrayed by their works. This compels us to question the conventional view of individualism.

The claim that individualism constitutes the very core of modernity sounds like a self-evident truth. But is 'healthy' individualism really the 'deepest truth' about modernity? Or, to put it more accurately, isn't individualism only one side of the coin, the side we prefer to look at, while the other, less respectable, side is being neglected?

The eruption of various kinds of individualism, i.e. the sudden expansion of a strong aspiration towards individual autonomy in many different fields of human life, has been constantly combined with an equally strong tendency towards isolation. Montaigne's moral and existential individualism expresses the typical ambition of having "ny commandant, ny maistre forcé" (II, 17, 626), more exactly the ambition of having exclusively an 'inner' master and some 'inner' laws of his own: "avoir estably un patron au dedans, auquel toucher nos actions et, selon celuy, nous caresser tantost, tantost nous chastier. J'ai mes loix et ma court pour juger de moy, et m'y adresse plus qu'ailleurs" (III, 2, 785).<sup>1</sup> There is, of course, an obvious attempt to be self-sufficient - "J'essaye à n'avoir exprès besoing de nul" (III, 9, 946) - but this is not simply another aspect of the need for autonomy; it is also the expression of a striving after solitude, of a deep conviction that one

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<sup>1</sup> The quotations are from M. Rat's edition of the *Essays* (Montaigne, *Oeuvres complètes*, Gallimard, 1962).

must retire in his “arrière boutique” and to be completely indifferent, even to the suffering of his own wife and children, in order to reach happiness.

Descartes’ intellectual individualism can be praised as an effort to reach cognitive independence and autonomy, to avoid, that is, “toute la connaissance acquise jusqu’à présent”, which is nothing else than “quelque maison mal bâtie, de qui les fondements ne sont pas assurés”.<sup>2</sup> But his ambition of “bâtir dans un fonds qui est tout à moi” (*Discours de la Méthode*) is not only the expression of his noble ideal of intellectual autonomy, but also the result of a *failure to share* any conviction with others, as he himself confesses: “je ne pouvais choisir personne dont les opinions me semblassent devoir être préféré à celles des autres et je me trouvai comme contraint d’entreprendre moi-même de me conduire”.<sup>3</sup>

The contractualist doctrines of Hobbes, Locke (and, to some extent, even that of Rousseau) visibly aim at creating a foundation for individual political autonomy; but their justification is based upon a deep conviction that, in itself, human life is “solitary” (Hobbes), because every human being is naturally an isolated individual: “chaque individu, qui par lui-même est un tout parfait et solitaire”... (Rousseau, *Du Contract Social*).

Berkeley, as a typical empiricist, is eager to achieve intellectual self-sufficiency by making knowledge exclusively dependent upon one’s own perceptions: this appears to be the only way in which errors can be avoided, according to his conviction that “so long as I confine my thoughts to my own ideas divested of words, I do not see

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<sup>2</sup> *La recherche de la vérité par la lumière naturelle*, in Descartes, *Oeuvres philosophiques*, Classiques Garnier, 1967, tome II, p.1117.

<sup>3</sup> Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, Hachette, 1899, (p.61).

how I can easily be mistaken".<sup>4</sup> But what explains the fascination exerted by his theory of knowledge is the extraordinarily striking picture implied by it: a picture representing the human mind as isolated on an island populated exclusively with its own perceptions, an island on which the only possible encounter is an encounter with itself. This picture, and nothing else, constituted the really important element hidden in Berkeley's conception, and that is proved by the dominant interpretation given to it in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, an interpretation leading to the conclusion that "Wohin wir nur sehen, so sehen wir bloß uns" (as Lichtenberg declares in his *Sudelbücher*, J 569).

Even Rousseau, despite his dangerous celebration of the General Will, participates to some extent in the effort to assure human autonomy, as long as he claims that men should be subjected exclusively to the rule of law, and never to the arbitrary will of some particular ruler. But, at the same time, he adds new arguments to Montaigne's rhetoric concerning the insurmountable incompatibilities between men, and it is this acute awareness of these incompatibilities which leads him to found the modern cult of solitude, to which Romanticism so enthusiastically adhered.

In no other mental universe than the Romantic one is the mixture of aspirations (towards autonomy and towards solitude) so visible and so striking. The autonomy of the self becomes absolute, to the extent that the whole world (what had previously been considered to be the very opposite of the self) appears now as emanating from the creative Ego, for instance in the view advanced by Fichte's philosophy. The *Ich* (the 'I') is now a Robinson so powerful and independent as to be able to create his own island (that Fichte's *Ich* is a Robinson has been noticed by the Romantics themselves: "Fichtens Ich - ist ein

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<sup>4</sup> George Berkeley, *The Principles of Human Knowledge*, Introduction: # 22.

Robinson - eine wissenschaftliche *Fiction*", Novalis remarks in *Das Allgemeine Brouillon*, # 717). But, despite the critique implied in this characterization, Novalis, like all Romantic thinkers, does not abandon the conviction that all humans are Robinsons, or, as he puts it, "heilige - isolirte Wesen..." And there should be no surprise in this. According to the Romantic ideology, the genuine human being is a poet or a philosopher, in any case a Creator, that is nothing less than an Author of a world of his own, some sort of God ("Der poëtische Philosoph ist *en état de Créateur absolu* - Novalis, *Das Allgemeine Brouillon* # 758). The condition of Author of a world implies, of course, not only absolute autonomy, but also absolute solitude, which is nothing else than living in a personal world or having oneself as one's only world, for "Einsam sein heißt also: eine Welt für sich sein".<sup>5</sup>

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It is thus hard to ignore that, although the (noble and understandable) desire to be autonomous and the (more intriguing although more banal) desire to be left alone are two different things (two things possibly connected but by no means identical), the modern eruption of individualism is very often accompanied by a strong inclination towards solitude.

Now, as soon as this is granted, an interesting question concerning priorities arises: is the modern, (more questionable) inclination towards solitude an inevitable side effect of the (very respectable) modern individualism, or, perhaps, the other way round, is it individualism which derives from an irresistible tendency towards solitude? In other words, is it real autonomy which leads to isolation, or is it the reality of isolation that stimulates a tendency towards autonomy?

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<sup>5</sup> Leo Maduschka *Das Problem der Eisankeit im 18. Jahrhundert*, Verlag von Alexander Duncker, 1933.

Of course, the alternative is not necessarily exclusive. More appropriately, one should probably ask: to what extent is modernity founded upon the drive towards autonomy and to what extent is it actually based upon an impulse towards solitude?

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This, of course, is a very ample and difficult question which cannot be exhaustively answered here. My present aim is just to point out some extremely remarkable cases, in which (contrary to the usual interpretations) it is the feeling of solitude (and also an option for solitude) that seem to force the modern Ego - this Robinson in permanent search of an island of his own - to attempt autonomization, not real autonomy that leads him to isolation. I shall thus claim that, in some important cases, the typically modern attitudes spring more from an impulse of solitude, than from a desire for independence. Solitude does not appear, in the works of famous authors like Montaigne, Descartes or Hobbes, as the price we have to pay for our independence; on the contrary, independence and autonomy appear as means by which we try to cope with our fundamental solitude and isolation.

Modernity, of course, does not spring from a single source; I am not trying to suggest that a deep feeling of solitude could be the unique driving force behind all evolutions in the modern world. But the importance of the following examples (Montaigne, Descartes, Hobbes, and to a large extent, Pascal) suggests that a rewriting of the history of modernity, focussing primarily upon solitariness, would not be out of place. Such a reconsideration would show how often *the celebration of a 'healthy' individualism is just a way of legitimizing an option for solitary ways.*

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There is an initial, obvious, difficulty, though: how could one differentiate, in more or less exact terms, between individualism and solitude? When Montaigne states that “il faut seul s’écarter de la troupe et entreprendre seul” (II, 16, 606); or when Pascal claims that one should act as if one was alone, for no one else could help: “on mourra seul: il faut donc faire comme si on était seul” (*Pensées*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, Gallimard, 1954, # 351); or again when Descartes declares, on the very first page of his *La recherche de la vérité*, that everyone must: “trouver en soi-même, et sans rien emprunter d’autrui, toute la science qui lui est nécessaire”; in all such cases, what are we confronted with: individualism or the typical mentality of the solitary? And, in the end, what is individualism and what is solitude? Could one draw a sharp boundary between them, especially with reference to works in the XVIth and the XVIIth century, some of which have the character of a literary essay or even of a confession?

Admittedly, the arguments for solitude and isolation come very often (almost always, one is tempted to say) mixed up with arguments for independence and autonomy. But the distinction between these two kinds of arguments cannot be annihilated; this, at least, is the premise of this paper. And this premise can be defended, I think, even if one does not provide a standard theoretical distinction between the two concepts, by pointing out a reasonably clear way of using them and of differentiating between cases of ‘healthy’ individualism and cases in which what seems to dominate is a (less laudable) tendency towards isolation.

‘Pure’ individualism is generally recognizable by its preoccupation with freedom, self-sufficiency and efficacy. The individualist attitudes aim at self-reliance, independence and efficiency. A person motivated by individualism does not look primarily for a separation from others,

even if some forms of separation inevitably follow his emancipation attempt; but he is interested above all in the optimization of his own life and in the maximization of its autonomy. When Thoreau states that: "The man who goes alone can start today; but he who travels with another must wait till that other is ready, and it may be a long time before they get off" (*Walden*, the chapter *Economy*), he is obviously dominated by the individualist preoccupation of efficiency. He does not praise solitude in itself (although he seems to do that in other fragments in *Walden*); he chooses the solitary way only because it is the fastest.

On the contrary, when the element of solitude prevails, the separation from all the others is the starting point. The solitary is inclined to dissociate himself from others, physically, morally or intellectually, and to keep them at a distance; he aims at isolating himself, although isolation also compels him to achieve a certain autonomy. But not this aspiration towards autonomy is the basic fact for him: he is motivated by an *incapacity to join*, or *to share*, or *to communicate*, by *disappointment* with others or the public life, by a certain *refusal of alterity*, or an *abandonment of dialogue*, or by an acute *feeling of incompatibility* (with others) which makes him *reluctant to participate*. Retreating is his first step, even though, in order to justify this step, the solitary can create a whole ideology of independence and self-sufficiency.

An individualist wants to emancipate himself from the domination of others or of a community, not to retreat; a solitary wants to escape from others or from society, and to retreat in a world of his own. The former can subsequently find himself in a certain isolation, due to his need of independence, but it is the latter who actually isolates himself. While the individualist refuses to subordinate, not to cooperate (in a convenient way), the solitary abandons cooperation and looks for a

refuge from the communal world. The former can continue to participate, but in an independent way; the latter takes refuge on a personal island (of ideas, experiences or sensations) and is, in general, reluctant to participate.

Thus, it could be said that perhaps the most important difference to be taken into account here is this: the impulse towards autonomy is basically *self-assertive*, whereas the impulse towards solitude is essentially *self-protective*; the former is more or less 'aggressive', if not against others, then at least against a certain hierarchy or order, while the latter is simply 'retractile'.

Now, I am not claiming that the above differentiation is always easy to make and sufficiently useful; there might be cases in which both elements are present and can hardly be separated, as well as cases in which the facts are ambiguous and no clear conclusion can be drawn. Nevertheless, it seems to me that in many cases the distinction can be made along these lines.

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The suggestion that the emancipatory move towards autonomy is often inspired by solitude, and not the other way round, should not come as a huge surprise and should not appear as a wild hypothesis. A precondition of modernity was the collapse of the old, well-ordered, mediaeval world, characterized by collective hierarchies and public identities, by many related kinds of 'communitarianism'; confronted with a radically new social landscape, characterized by more diversity and deeper incompatibilities, which sometimes led to acute conflicts, modern men could have experienced a new kind of solitude; when confronted with a new kind of disorder, after the death of the 'enchanted world', they might have faced an adaptation crisis and,

consequently, have sought refuge in a solitary, autonomous existence which included individualism as a basic element or as a consequence.

Thus, it simply might be the case that the ‘sickness of solitude’, and not the ‘healthy’, pragmatic, individualism, was the rock bottom supporting the foundations of the modern world; it is perhaps solitude, and not individualism, that constitutes the basic fact about modern life and culture. Individualism could then be presented as a component and perhaps even as a result of a more fundamental option for solitary existence. The usual inclination is to see modern solitude as a side effect of individualism; but why wouldn’t be ‘healthy’ individualism a happy side effect of solitude?

Without diminishing the extension of individualism, nor its consequences for the modern world, this conclusion would modify to a significant extent its place in the hierarchy of needs and values. Individual independence and autonomy (almost unanimously praised), privacy and the prevalence of the ‘inner world’ over the ‘outer’ one (so openly preached by Benjamin Constant), the supremacy of authenticity (as a duty to ‘be true to oneself’) might now appear as *legitimations* of an initial reaction of retreat and separation – and they might lose, thereby, a part of their glamour. This, I agree, is a positive thing, for it can make it easier for us to see that individualism and privacy, autonomy and authenticity, contain in themselves not only deep ‘final’ truths about what men are and what they need, but also a *huge amount of mythology*. It is a mythology meant to justify several basic modern steps towards *separation*, and therefore, has at its centre (not surprisingly at all) principles pertaining to *the essential solitude of man*. It goes without saying that the spreading of this mythology had a lot of positive consequences for modern societies, but this should not stop us from recognising its nature, as well as its possible bad consequences. Moreover, and this is perhaps the most

important thing, the positive effects should never make us prisoners of the wrong idea that the adoption of this mythology was inevitable and 'natural', part of the irresistible march of 'progress': *individualism is itself a historic human construct, not an 'ultimate truth' about human nature.*

This could become more evident when remembering some basic facts about the 'founding fathers' of modernity: Montaigne, Descartes, Pascal and Hobbes have not started from *new, revolutionary, inventions*, which made individual autonomy possible; they decided to take lonely ways *before* making such inventions. And their option for solitude has been dictated neither by objective, inevitable, constraints, nor by *decisive* arguments (they had no such arguments); it was a premise, not a conclusion. Moreover, what seems to have inspired their decision for isolation was *a crisis* connected with multiple failures (failure to cope with diversity, with competition, with incommunicability, and with the recently discovered hatred and selfishness characterising humans). Thus, in the beginning was *crisis* and *defeat*, not a victory; solitude and defensive isolation preceded victorious individualism. Perhaps later this initial defeat led, paradoxically, to success: solitude led to autonomy, isolation to emancipatory individualism. But even if we acknowledge that, the usual idea - 'modernity is a success-story of individualism' - is much too simplistic. There is as much defeat present in this story as it is success. And we should see both sides of the coin: individualism as self-reliance, but also as horror of others; autonomy as independence, but also as isolation; self-sufficiency as dignity, but also as flight from public life, from intercourse and cooperation; effective individual techniques of thinking as answering a need for efficiency, but also as expressing reluctance to dialogue, or allergy to the 'noise' of public debate.

## II. Solitude as Isolation in a Personal Relationship with God

“they...can endure no company”

ROBERT BURTON, *Anatomy of Melancholy*

Despite the fact that, at least for Christians, religious life had traditionally been a field of ‘communitarian’ experience, one of the earliest forms of individualism has precisely been religious individualism. The modern quest for autonomy in religious belief is, of course, undeniable. The first element of this quest is probably what has been called ‘the privatisation of religion’. Speaking about “the devotional movement of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which privatised the attempt to achieve salvation”, Niklas Luhmann remarks:

“On the basis of a religious world view, the movement fought against a competing tendency to associate individualism with libertinage, with a *fort esprit* that defied religion. The difference between salvation and damnation remained decisive. But religious care was no longer care for others. It did not require praying for others, monastic conditions, or supererogatory works. Instead, it was care for one’s own sole salvation.”<sup>6</sup>

Now, the question is how this ‘privatisation of salvation’ should be understood. Should we take it as a ‘healthy’, emancipatory,

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<sup>6</sup> Niklas Luhmann *The Individuality of the Individual: Historical Meanings and Contemporary Problems*, in Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna, David Wellbery (eds.), *Reconstructing Individualism*, Stanford University Press, 1986, p.315.

initiative or rather as a kind of defensive (and selfish) reaction to the collapse of the 'enchanted world', to the dissolution of the 'communitarian' social and spiritual orders which characterised the Middle Age? Luhmann *prima facie* connects the change with a philosophical event: the fact that,

“by Descartes' time, medieval scholastic debate had settled one thing about individuality of the individual: individuality cannot be defined by pointing to some special quality of the individual in counterdistinction to other qualities; it is not something given to an individual from the outside. An individual is itself the source of its own individuality; the concept of individuality therefore has to be defined by self-reference”.<sup>7</sup>

But this autonomization of the individual cannot be taken simply as a 'discovery' of the independence and of the self-defining capacity of human beings. Individuality, as deliberate self-assertion of men, and not as 'something given from the outside', is bound to express certain human, 'subjective', choices. The most interesting thing in Luhmann's interpretation is the presentation he makes of these choices, as attempts to seek refuge in a personal world. Individualism thus appears not as a robust result of some happy discovery (that humans can and should be recognised as independent beings apt to find salvation *individually* and *privately*); it rather appears as the effect of an attempt to escape from the social and religious disorder which had recently emerged in the Western world.

“The scholastic theory of individuality was, of course, written by and for humans who had to make up their minds about themselves and their social conditions. Thus, the special importance of self-reference for defining the human individual

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<sup>7</sup> Idem, p.314.

is not surprising. Amid religious schism, political wars, emerging sovereign states, and economic progress and decline, self-reference, which reconstructs the individual on the basis of its own problems and resources, must have seemed an attractive refuge".<sup>8</sup>

According to this way of seeing things, the characteristically modern privatisation of salvation should be perceived less as an emancipatory step, or as a discovery of some possibility of improving one's relationship with God, and more as an attempt to escape from an increasingly maddening world. Religion, which used to be a 'communitarian universe', becomes now a personal instrument of salvation, but this new religious individualism is not the result of some success in the enterprise of 'optimising' the human relationship with God; it is rather the consequence of the individual's failure to adapt to the recently emerged disorders in the world. The modern man seeks refuge in spiritual solitude, and religious individualism appears as nothing more than an instrument used to this end. Exactly like a man who, due to failures in his public life and social connections, seeks refuge in a certain personal relationship, the modern individual, discouraged by the surrounding chaos, seeks refuge in a personal relationship with God. But the kind of religious individualism which results from such a retreat in a personal universe is inspired by one's need of solitude, as in all cases in which one attempts to isolate oneself from others or from the world. One can thus be inclined towards the hypothesis that it is the need to be alone (with God) which appears as fundamental, and not the (much-praised) ambition of self-assertion, independence and self-sufficiency.

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<sup>8</sup> idem, p.315.

The privatisation of religion, as a consequence of this need of solitude is not, of course, the only relevant aspect. The more familiar significant element is certainly the growing modern feeling that God is not present any more in the world, in any relevant sense which could be assumed for such a presence. The spreading of Atheism and Deism in the Western world, after the Renaissance, is the obvious component of the process by which spiritual solitude extends its domination. Today it is largely agreed that this process really starts with the Copernican Revolution:

“Man spricht heute von der kopernikanischen Wende der Neuzeit und meint, sie habe nicht nur das astronomische Weltbild, sondern die Stellung des Menschen zur Welt, zu Gott und zu sich selbst verändert. Denn wenn die Erde aus der Mitte des Weltalls verschwindet und Gott sich in die Unendlichkeit entzieht, dann sieht der Mensch sich auf sich selber gestellt. Das neuzeitliche Subjekt wird geboren und mit ihm der Begriff des Subjekts, das heißt der Begriff eines sich wissenden, sich bestimmenden und sich verantwortenden Selbst. (Das mittelalterliche >>subiectum<< war etwas ganz anderes, es war das allem Seienden >>Zugrundeliegende<<, das Sein oder Gott). In dem Maße aber, wie der Mensch Subjekt, das heißt eine Welt für sich wird, lockern sich die Bindungen an die Gemeinschaft, die ihn getragen und geschützt hatten. Damit wird der Weg für die Erfahrung der Einsamkeit frei...”<sup>9</sup>

In the above presentation, as in many others, it is suggested that the birth of the modern Subject is the source of modern Solitude; in most cases, this is taken for granted, for one is inclined to describe modernity, in grand and laudatory terms, as ‘the era of triumphant

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<sup>9</sup> Wolfgang Binder, *Einsamkeit als Thema der Literatur*, in Hans-Jürgen Schultz (ed.), *Einsamkeit*, Kreuz Verlag, 1980, p. 98.

Individuality' and this description leaves solitude only the modest place of a new field to be explored by the newly-born autonomous individuals. In other words, the 'big discovery' is the discovery of individuality, the central point from which many different paths lead us in different directions; solitude is just a particular area to which one of these paths takes us.

But such an interpretation can easily be self-congratulatory, and the question remains whether it is not the other way round: isn't the invention of individuality in fact due to the birth of modern solitude? Couldn't individualism be thought of as an instrument meant to legitimize a new, deep, kind of solitude? Shouldn't one start from sad facts indicating an inclination towards solitude (inability to cope with individual diversity, a communication break or an incapacity to maintain dialogue, loss of common, shared, values, excessive personal pride after the vanishing of the medieval sense of humility etc.), instead of starting from the 'noble' aspiration towards individual autonomy?

A useful hint is provided here by the typical double attitude of the modern mind towards God. On one hand, the modern man aspires to autonomy, that is, he doesn't accept any more the traditional position in which he was guided by God and appeared as a child obeying his 'Father'. His temerarious ideal is, not to have a God-Father but, to become a God-Father (as Hölderlin puts it: "jeder ein Gott"... He speaks here about *Die Eichbäume* - this is also the title of this poem - but he exclaims: "wie gerne würd' ich zum Eichbaum" - being a God is not just a fact, it's an ideal!); not to have a Master, but to become a Master (and solitude is necessary, in this respect, for, as Leonardo da Vinci remarked in his *Notebooks*, as early as the beginning of the XVIth century, "While you are alone, you are entirely your own master"). On the other hand, though, the modern man keeps complaining of being an 'orphan' or having remained 'alone' in the world. In no other modern universe is this contradiction so

visible as it is in the Romantic one. Here we have the deep, and well-documented, Romantic conviction that a true human being, a Poet or an Author, and especially a Genius, is like a God and must become a God. But we also have the complaint of Christ and of the Dead that 'we all are orphans', at the discovery that "there is no God" (Cf. Jean Paul's famous fragment in *Siebenkäs*: the speech of Christ to the Dead).

The discovery that 'we all are orphans' provokes an immense trembling and, in the end, a collapse of the whole world, the significance of which is hard to reconcile with the widely praised ambition of reaching autonomy.

Were the aspiration towards individual autonomy basic for modern men, there would have been no reason for such a contradictory attitude. Whereas if the basic thing is the feeling of solitude, then both gestures are only natural, for celebrating solitude and complaining about it are nothing else than two normal reactions to the condition of the solitary individual.

### III. Montaigne: Existential Individualism as Isolation from the Other

“il faut ramener et retirer en soy:  
c’est la vraie solitude”

MONTAIGNE, *De la Solitude*

As long as human beings perceived their own lives as parts of an ampler destiny, the temptations of solitude and retreat could appear as deviations from the normal itinerary which has been prescribed to them (by God or by whatever was responsible for that destiny). Selfishness, or at least self-centeredness, and self-absorption thus appear as sins or as deviant traits. The importance given to that ampler destiny creates duties towards something else than oneself: towards God, or Mankind or the General Good. But the modern soul tends to neglect the existence of ‘ampler destinies’, even when it does not deny them explicitly. Consequently, duties towards God and towards one’s fellow humans tend to vanish. Duties to oneself, on the contrary, come to the forefront, as many of Montaigne’s remarks make clear. A “trueness to a man’s self” (to borrow Francis Bacon’s formula in the essay *Of Faction*) becomes now the most important thing.

Now, this is a modification of priorities, which, as I shall try to show, actually brings solitude in the centre of things. For, as long as man was seen in such a way that his solitude appeared as somehow ‘abnormal’ (inside an ampler destiny according to which human beings were meant to participate in an enterprise converging towards a great end), the significance of ‘being alone’ could not be really very important. Harmony and Co-operation were the major things; solitude

was just an accident, or, as in the case of monks and hermits, only a particular way of 'doing one's duty' towards God.

But as soon as duty towards oneself becomes the main thing, the inevitable conflict between different individual selves becomes apparent; incompatibility, disharmony and confrontation occupy the centre of the stage, while co-operation and sociability seem now accidental. *You are bound to be alone, because it's only you who makes your own happiness the most important thing in the world*; all the others work for *their* happiness, and this can only create trouble for yourself. Thus, it is a certain metaphysical view of human destiny and of the self which supports the doctrine of solitude: this doctrine is far from deriving from mere commitment to individual autonomy.

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Montaigne is perhaps the author who describes in the most explicit and direct way this eagerness to reach autonomy and independence. He is very pathetic in the expression of his wish of never owing anything to anyone:

"Combien je supplie instamment sa sainte misericorde que jamais je ne doive un essentiel grammercy à personne! [...] J'essaye à n'avoir exprès besoing de nul" (III, 9, 946)

It would seem that this wish is a very noble one, springing from the honest and dignified rejection of any undeserved richness: "Je veux estre riche par moy, non par emprunt" - II, 16, 608. And it could also seem that Montaigne's plea for solitude expresses precisely this noble ambition of relying his happiness exclusively upon his own means:

"faisons que nostre contentement despende de nous; desprenons nous de toutes les liaisons qui nous attachent à

autruy, gaignons sur nous de pouvoir à bon escient vivre seuls et y vivre à nostre aise" (I, 39, 235).

This impression is strengthened by the fact that sometimes the invitation to disconnect oneself from others is justified by evoking certain efficacy requirements. The commandment that we should always rely upon ourselves - "Nous mesmes, qui est la plus juste adresse" (III, 9, 946) - seems supported by rational considerations like the following: help coming from others is uncertain and weak as compared to one's own help to oneself - "en toutes choses les hommes se jettent aux appuis estrangeres pour espargner les propres, seuls certains et seuls puissans, qui sçait s'en armer" (III, 12, 1022); or, public life is beyond individual control, at the mercy of fate, whereas private life depends essentially on one's own will and determination: "les mouvements publics dependent plus de la conduite de la fortune, les privez de la nostre" (III, 8, 920). One can thus be tempted to believe that Montaigne's insistence upon the value of isolation is dictated exclusively by a robust interest in efficacy. Since success is what we are after, and since our own resources do constitute the most reliable instrument to achieve it, then, in a world in which cooperation with others can jeopardize the final results, it seems quite reasonable to seek autonomy and avoid any interference with other people.

But textual evidence vigorously contradicts this tonic interpretation. A more careful reading of the famous *Essays* reveals that solitude occupies a much more important place in them, than the one suggested by this luminous interpretation: *solitude is the background and the foundation of this ambition towards autonomy, not its by-effect.*

First of all, it appears that Montaigne's feeling (and high-esteem) of solitude is based upon his disappointment with society and public

life. The picture he evokes is black: we have to do with a world of wickedness and threat (“cette société universelle de mal et de menace” - III, 9, 938) created through the joint efforts of all its participants:

“La corruption du siècle se fait par la contribution particulière de chacun de nous: les uns y confèrent la trahison, les autres l’injustice, l’irreligion, la tyrannie, l’avarice, la cruauté, selon qu’ils sont plus puissans; les plus foibles y apportent la sottise, la vanité, l’oisiveté, desquels je suis” (III, 9, 923)

Insisting upon unloyalty - “desloyauté, qui est pour moy la pire espece des vices” (III, 9,934) - Montaigne complains that “nous vivons en un monde où la loyauté des propres enfans est inconnue” (III, 9, 930). If children and relatives are not grateful and loving as they should be, strangers are unfair to one because their esteem “despend toute de la fortune” (II, 16, 608). Thus, human relationships are wholly disappointing. But that is not all; everything goes wrong, according to Montaigne.

He keeps mentioning “la ruine de mon pays” (III, 12, 1023), “ce notable spectacle de nostre mort publique” (Ibidem), or the “confusion où nous sommes depuis trente ans...” (III, 12, 1022). He is particularly shocked by the dissolution of institutions and public bodies, complaining for instance that “nos armées ne se lient et tiennent plus que par simant estrange” (III, 12, 1018). At the same time, he is very skeptical about the ‘General Good’, for “le bien public requiert qu’on trahisse et qu’on mente et qu’on massacre” (III, 1, 768) and, understandably enough, he is reluctant to dedicate himself to it: “la cause generale et juste ne m’attache non plus que moderément et sans fièvre” (III, 1, 769).

The image of a community which is kept together only by contingencies and which relies upon treason, lies and brutality, is, of course, susceptible to reorient attention to the only remaining centers of coherence and stability: the individuals that compose it. Disillusionment with the society of his times thus provides a first reason for the long-time isolation he always alludes to: “il y a si long temps de me tenir à moy, et separer des choses estrangeres” (III, 12, 1022). This strategy should be universalized: “il faut seul s’écarter de la troupe et entreprendre seul” (II, 16, 606).

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A second reason is Montaigne’s disappointment concerning his own influence upon his fellow countrymen. He complains that he has never been able to detect even the smallest effect of his opinions upon his compatriots or upon society as a whole: “je [...] ne sache nulle entreprinse publique ny privé que mon advis aie redressée et ramenée” (III, 2, 793); the result of this sad experience is the conclusion that one cannot really contribute to the well-being of others, or, for that matter, to the General Good. In another context, this conclusion would have constituted a lesson of humility, calling for new efforts from the individual to the benefit of his fellow men; not so for the modern soul, dominated by pride and ready to give up any attempts of cooperation. For Montaigne, the moral is simple: since one is unable to help others, one should not accept others’ help. Here it is, then, one of his most important justifications of isolation:

“il est temps de nous desnouer de la société, puis que nous n’y pouvons rien apporter. Et qui ne peut prester, qu’il se defende d’emprunter” (I, 39, 236)

Obviously, this advice aims not only at granting autonomy, but also at establishing solitude as the ideal condition of a rational man. But solitude and autonomy are not justified only by the sad fact that no mutual help is possible; they are also recommended by the encouraging fact that no mutual help is needed: at least in some (exemplary) cases, a man is perfectly self-sufficient. This is exactly what Montaigne claims about himself, drawing a boundary between a *grand esprit* and the ordinary people:

“La plus part des esprits ont besoing de matière estrangere pour se desgourdir et exercer; le mien en a besoing pour se rassoir plustost et sejourner... ” (III, 3, 796).

For such an exemplary personality, solitude is neither an existential accident, nor a mere contingent consequence of autonomy; it is rather the ‘natural’ and optimal environment or state. And what else should a wise man do, than to assume his natural state?

“il y a plusieurs années que je n’ay que moy pour visée à mes pensées, que je ne contrerolle et estudie que moy; et, si j’estudie autre chose, c’est pour soudain le coucher sur moy, ou en moy” (II, 6, 358)

Self-centeredness, self-sufficiency and solitude are not sins or regrettable contingencies any more; they have become a way of life which Montaigne obviously recommends as being the only adequate one for modern men. The antagonism between the ordinary existential strategy and the one proposed in the *Essays* is not meant to stress two equally reasonable ways of life; it is rather intended to show the sharp opposition between *what men do* and *what they should do*:

“Le monde regarde toujours vis à vis; moy, je replie ma veue au dedans moy; je n’ay affaire qu’à moy, je me considere sans

cesse, je me contrerolle, je me gouste. Les autres vont toujours ailleurs, s'ils y pensent bien... moy je me roule en moy mesme" (II, 17, 378)

Montaigne advances several arguments for an universalization of his strategy. Some of these seem to express simply his aristocratic disgust towards his contemporaries and his appreciation of "celuy qui se retire, ennuié et dégoûté de la vie commune" (I, 39, 240). We happen to be (he suggests) in very bad company, and our wish to avoid the presence of others is as natural as a merchant's reluctance to be on board of a ship together with men who are "dissolus, blasphemateurs, meschans" (I, 39, 232). Montaigne is convinced that, in most cases, company implies inconvenience rather than advantage, and he therefore decides to avoid it:

"la plus part des compaignies fortuites que vous rencontrez en chemin ont plus d'incommodité que de plaisir: je ne m'y attache point" (III, 9, 964-965)

Given the familiar metaphor of *life as a journey*, this conclusion can easily become the justification for a general preference for solitude. After all, from a very general metaphysical point of view, all those who are around us in life can be seen as "compaignies fortuites": even our closest partners were not pre-destined to become our partners, and their presence in our life is, more or less, due to chance and accident. We shall see later that Montaigne's attitude towards his own family confirms this way of seeing one's closest partners as mere contingent and temporary partners. Thus, the contingency of partnership may justify its marginalisation: relations with others are and must be of only marginal importance.

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But there also are arguments of much deeper significance. One of them is that, the normal aim of anyone being “d’en vivre plus à loisir et à son l’aise” (I, 39 ,233) and the natural state of things being that one’s profit comes from some other’s damage (“Le profit de l’un est dommage de l’autre” - I, 22, 105), it is only natural that human beings should avoid each other. The metaphysical picture is that of an universe of mutual incompatibilities (“la naissance, nourissement et augmentation de chaque chose est l’alteration et corruption de’un autre” - I, 22, 106). And the same incompatibilities can be found between men, given their different judgments and opinions (“il advient souvent que les jugements d’autrui ne s’accordent pas aux miens, et les ay trouvez plus souvent faux” (III, 9, 963), but also given their opposing interests:

“que chacun se sonde au dedans, il trouvera que nos souhaits interieurs pour la plus part naissent et se nourrissent aux despens d’autrui” (I, 22, 106)

Thus people are bound to harm each other - an excellent reason for avoiding each other.

But incompatibilities spring also from less grand features of the world; for instance, from individual differences which (according to Montaigne’s opinion) are much more important than individual similarities. Although he admits that “chaque homme porte la forme entiere de l’humaine condition” (III, 2, 782) Montaigne emphatically acknowledges, in contradistinction to ordinary people, the priority of differences over similarities: “au rebours du commun, reçois plus facilement la difference que la ressemblance en nous” (I, 37, 259). And, of course, this awareness of individual differences becomes another reason for proud isolation from others: “qu’on ne me tire en consequence des communs exemples” (*Ibidem*).

Another argument, and an extremely remarkable one, for the inevitability of solitude comes from a new vision of individuality as subjectivity. This vision is based on the premise that all that is important for a human being takes place in an inner, private space, the soul. It is in this exclusive receptacle that suffering takes place, for it is only here that “la crainte de la mort, des douleurs et de la honte” (II, 16, 339) are present and haunt us. But also pleasure and joy are hidden in this secret, exclusive, place:

“les plus délicieux plaisirs, si se digèrent-ils au dedans, fuyent à laisser traces de soi, et fuyent la veuë non seulement du peuple, mais d’un autre” (II, 18, 386)

No ‘foreign soul’ has access to this inner sanctuary (“les étrangers[...] ne voyent pas mon cœur” - II, 16, 609) and consequently no ‘stranger’ can grasp one’s ‘inner nature’:

“il n’y a que vous qui sache si vous estes lache et cruel, ou loyal et devotieux; les autres ne vous voyent point; ils vous devinent par conjectures et incertaines; ils voyent non tant vostre nature que vostre art” (III, 2, 785)

This explains why undeserved praise and undeserved blame are so frequent: “tout conté, il me semble qu’aussi souvent on me louë qu’on me desprise outre la raison (III, 9, 958). Human contacts are bound to be difficult and disappointing, if they are based upon ignorance (of each other’s ‘true, inner nature’) and upon wrong appreciation of each other.

Thus, the insistence upon the reality and the centrality of the private, inner, space has, as its main consequence, a legitimisation of estrangement: everyone is nothing else than a ‘stranger’ for others.

Despite what some poets enthusiastically proclaimed (“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of a continent” – according to John Donne’s famous verse in *Devotions*), cool thinking, of the kind Montaigne and other philosophers engage in, seemed to prove that we are essentially isolated and mutually inaccessible.

Now, taken in itself, as a mere contingent event, isolation should not be such a fatally devastating fact: a more optimistic age would answer to it by trying to devise means of reducing solitude and estrangement, of improving mutual knowledge and communication. But that is not what modernity was busy to do. Exactly as, when confronted with a cool reception to his initiatives in public life, Montaigne was ready to retreat in his privacy, when confronted with the fact of isolation he is eager to accept it and to adapt to it, by exclusively directing his interests to himself. Far from rejecting solitude, as abnormal or harmful, he hurries to embrace it and defend it as natural. Our inner life should not be directed towards others, or towards public life, but towards our (inner) invisible selves:

“ce n’est pas pour la montre que nostre ame doit jouer son rolle, c’est chez nous au dedans, où nuls yeux ne donnent que les nostres” (II, 16, 607)

He speaks despisingly about those who dedicate themselves to what is outside them, about “les ames actives et occupés qui embrassent tout et s’engagent par tout, qui se passionnent de toutes choses, qui s’offrent, qui se donnent à tout occasions” (I, 39, 237). Everything that is outside us can only serve as a useful instrument, but should never belong to the fundamentals of our life:

“il se faut servir de ces commoditez accidentales et hors de nous, en tant qu’elles nous sont plaisantes, mais sans en faire nostre principal fondement” (*Ibidem*).

Thus, what Montaigne provides is, in fact, a recipe for self-absorption: all the important elements of our life should be placed *inside* us. The aim of life should be life itself ([La vie] "doit estre elle mesme à soy sa visée, son dessein" - III, 12, 298), our 'patron' (or our master) should be one placed inside us:

"Nous autres principialement, qui vivons une vie privée qui n'est montrée qu'à nous, devons avoir estably un patron au dedans, auquel toucher nos actions et, selon celuy, nous caresser tantost, tantost nous chastier. J'ai mes loix et ma court pour juger de moy, et m'y adresse plus ailleurs" (III, 2, 785).

One's main task, accordingly, should be confined within the limits of a narrow area – the area of one's own conduct: "la principale charge que nous ayons, c'est à chacun sa conduite; et c'est pourquoy que nous sommes ici" (III, 10, 247). Living with others or, even worse, for others, is a strategic mistake, for relationships bring more trouble than happiness:

"Qui que ce soit, ou art ou nature, qui nous imprime cette condition de vivre par la relation à autruy, nous faict beaucoup plus de mal que de bien" (III, 9, 932).

It is therefore allowed and recommended to be indifferent towards others:

"je me sers rarement des advis d'autruy" (III, 2, 792),  
and,

"Si je ne recoy pas de conseil, j'en donne encores moins [...] ma profession, qui este de m'establir et contenir tout en moi [...] ce m'est plaisir d'estre desinteressé des affaires d'autruy" (III, 2, 793)

On the contrary, “ce seroit une espece de trahison de le faire aux propres et domestiques affaires” (III, 1, 5). One’s only, but major, duty is to oneself and this easily explains why isolation can be so favorable to one’s accomplishments.

But this isolation from the world of the other people (caused by a reluctance to base one’s life upon relationships with others), as well as the isolation from the outside world (determined by one’s refusal to place the fundamentals of one’s own life *in the outer world*) somehow makes the whole world *irrelevant* (or only marginally and temporary relevant) to the individual. One could almost say that *reality* itself, as the main partner of the self, has thus been eliminated from the game, to be only incidentally reestablished (i.e., taken again into account) when it might be of some help to the self. What could be called ‘the game of life’ becomes a *solitary* game, every important element of which is and should be placed inside the Great Player, which is the Self. Once upon a time, the game was played between two partners, the self and the world, or between several players (between several people and the, sometimes hostile but some other times friendly, world). Now, that both other people and the outer world are relegated among *one’s contingent instruments* for happiness (“ces commoditez accidentales et hors de nous, en tant qu’elles nous sont plaisantes”), the self must face *the deepest metaphysical solitude*: there is nothing around him, except for some instruments to be picked up and used incidentally, but which should be ignored *as things in themselves* (for, *per se*, each of them is irrelevant).

The contact with the outer world is temporary, purely instrumental and entirely shaped by one’s personal interests:

“je ne me jette au monde que pour la part que j’en tire. Au partir de là, je l’en quitte” (III, 2, 786)

This attitude reflects, of course, some personal preferences (“j’ayme la vie privée” - III, 9, 966 – Montaigne admits) and “la liberté et l’oisiveté, qui sont mes maistresses qualitez” (III, 9, 971) could very well explain his retreat from the world. But much more than that is at stake. On one hand, the self-centeredness which severs the deeper connections between the *I* and the world, sparing only some accidental contacts, follows inevitably from a *jouisseur*-mentality:

“je me contente de jouir le monde sans m’en empresser, de vivre une vie seulement excusable, et qui seulement ne poise ny à moy, ny à autruy” (III, 9, 930).

As long as the only aim of life is *jouir le monde* (or “vivre plus à loisir et à son aise”), the leading maxim is “il faut estendre la joye, mais retrencher autant qu’on peut la tristesse” (III, 9, 957) and the main modern attitudes are shaped by an obsession with the *joie de vivre*, disinterestedness in others and isolation from them (isolation on the island of one’s own pleasures) become inevitable. But such phenomena are now accepted not only as matters of fact, but also as existential norms – Montaigne, for instance, states that “il faut se prester à autruy et ne se donner qu’à soy mesme” (III, 10, 243). The relationships with others not only are, but also must be, purely instrumental – it is only one’s relation with oneself that is really important and enduring.

The modern self, as illustrated by Montaigne, is thus essentially alone, not because he appreciates autonomy and independence more than solidarity and interdependence, but because he decides to see anything else (other people or the outer world) as a mere instrument of his, *of no importance in itself*.

It is not his emancipation (from the domination of others, or from gregariousness) which generates his solitude – it is rather his option for a solitary existence (for placing the essentials of his life in himself, for relying upon nothing else than himself and for isolating himself) that makes him independent from others.

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Although the arguments quoted above clearly indicate how strong is the presence of solitude (both as a background and as an ideal) in Montaigne's thinking, the main proofs are still to come. Undeniably, the most important arguments for solitude are to be found in his famous essays on solitude (*De la Solitude*) and on vanity (*De la Vanité*).

Once again, we must take care not to be deceived by some prestigious commonplaces into thinking that the true basis of Montaigne's attitude is an elevate attachment to individual autonomy. It is true, though, that he does not omit to declare that "Nature nous a mis au monde libre et desliez" (III, 9, 950) or that "nous sommes chacun plus riche que nous ne pensons" (III, 12, 1015). Starting from such laudable statements which seem to praise individuality, someone could conclude that Montaigne's inspiration comes from a high and modern view of human nature.

But pay attention to the way his plea is structured and to the place such principles occupy in his thinking: not these grand, emancipatory, principles propel his argumentation. His really important reasons are quite different, and quite far away from such generous statements.

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One of Montaigne's main reasons for choosing solitude is his obvious incapacity to endure public life and the presence of the crowd. He despises, of course, the vulgar multitude, but what propels him is

not just an aristocratic disgust of ordinary people, for he dismisses in the same breath both the crowd and the Court agglomeration:

“La solitude que j’aime et que je presche, ce n’est principalement que ramener à moy mes affections et mes pensées, restreindre et resserrer non mes pas, mains mes desirs et mon soucy, resignant la sollicitude estrangere et fuyant mortellement la servitude et l’obligation [...] Au Louvre et en la foule, je me resserre et contraincts en ma peau; la foule me repousse à moy” (III, 3, 801)

One wonders what could be the origin of this almost pathological reaction against other people or against multitudes. One possible explanation could rely upon some personal psychological difficulties, such as the difficulty to communicate with others (many fragments seem to suggest such a problem in Montaigne’s life – see especially III, 3, 796-801, but there are also other relevant passages). But if one looks at his basic themes, one soon realizes that the most likely explanation is another one. Montaigne simply hates the complications, the difficulties, the obligations and the dissipations implied by contacts with other people. The fragment quoted above is very explicit in this respect: being among other people means being solicited or having to solicit, being compelled to think of others and to pay attention at their desires, being constrained to preoccupy oneself with others’ problems, having his attention and energy dissipated with others’ concerns, having obligations towards others. This is exactly what Montaigne, as a typical representative of a very characteristic modern attitude, does not want to accept. He simply does not want to be bothered with others’ problems and concerns; his obsession is to concentrate upon his own concerns, to direct his own desires towards himself, to avoid any servitude. He is particularly explicit and insistent upon his reluctance to have any duties. Not only that he repeats the

confession: “Je fuis à me submettre à toute sorte d’obligation” (III, 9, 944); but he also confesses that his hatred of obligations is so intense, that he welcomes improper conduct from others *because that annihilates his own duties towards them*:

“J’ayme tant à me descharger et desobliger que j’ay par fois compté à profit les ingratitudez, offences et indignitez que j’avois receu de ceux à qui, ou par nature ou par accident, j’avois quelque devoir d’amitié, prenant cette occasion de leur faute à autant d’acquit et descharge de ma debte.” (III, 9, 945).

It is particularly hard to see any trace of the noble aspiration to autonomy in this attitude, especially because Montaigne is so sincere about the hate-ingredient in it: “j’ay prins à haine mortelle d’estre tenu ny à autre, ny par autre que moy” (III, 9, 947). Is there any symptom of emancipatory individualism in this ‘deadly hate’?

Although he praises friendship, in accord with all the moral norms of his times, Montaigne proves to be very original in his approach to this kind of relationship. He proclaims friendship to be at its best when manifesting itself...at a distance and when relying upon...separation:

“Nous remplissons mieux et estandions la possession de la vie en nous separant; il vivoit, il jouissoit, il voyoit pour moy, et moy pour luy [...] la separation du lieu rendoit la conjonction de nos volonteiz plus riche. Cette faim insatiable de la presence corporelle accuse un peu la foiblesse en la jouissance des ames” (III, 9, 955)

This strikingly critical attitude towards (what we are normally inclined to consider as) a quite natural need of physical presence can easily be taken as betraying a phobia of the presence of the Other

or of Otherness. Such an aversion would easily explain the inclination towards solitude. But here it is not necessary to take Montaigne as a subject for psychoanalysis. A much more important thing is to recognize that, by this unusual approach, Montaigne lays the foundations of a typically modern *cult of distance*. A remarkable modern feeling is that proximity (which, among other things, makes human defects visible) is something to be avoided. Montaigne justifies this by confessing that

“J’approuve celui qui ayme moins son enfant d’autant qu’il est ou teigneux ou bossu, et non seulement quand il est malicieux [...] En moy, la proximité n’allege pas les deffaults, elle les aggrave plustost” (III, 9, 945)

*Distance* is thus preferable and *normal*, because nobody really wants too much closeness, as La Rochefoucauld will soon inform us:

“Comme on doit garder les distances pour voir les objets, il en faut garder aussi pour la société: chacun a son point de vue, d’où il veut être regardé; on a raison, le plus souvent, de ne vouloir pas être éclairé de trop près, et il n’y a presque point d’homme qui veuille, en toutes choses, se laisser voir tel qu’il est”.<sup>10</sup>

The important element here is that, for La Rochefoucauld, who is another typical representative of modern mentalities (a champion, for instance, of the idea that selfishness is normal, and that what makes one to reject it is simply that *others’* selfishness affects *one’s own* selfishness), maintaining a distance between individuals is not only *natural*, but also *right*. This can, of course, be taken as a justification of *privacy*, and the positive side of the coin is obvious: maintaining

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<sup>10</sup> La Rochefoucauld, *Oeuvres complètes*, Éditions de la Pléiade, 1964, p. 507.

the distance between different selves is important because privacy is (immensely) important for modern men. Less visible, or at least less acknowledged, is the darker side of the coin: as La Rochefoucauld clearly suggests, protecting privacy also implies hiding one's true nature (at least partially), playing roles, pretending to be a different person than that you really are; but then, what about the much appreciated *cult of authenticity* attributed by many (more recently, by Charles Taylor, in his *Ethics of Authenticity*) to the modern mind as a defining characteristic? And to that it could be added the (equally unpleasant) consequence that, since keeping others at a distance guarantees privacy, solitude would appear as the best guarantee for privacy. Rousseau and then the Romantics will not be afraid of stating explicitly this consequence.

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One clear symptom of *essential solitude* is Montaigne's perception of human links. He does not see one's most intimate connections (with one's family, one's children or one's closest friends) as ingredients of one's own being, nor as part of one's normal and indispensable environment, at least; all such connections are perceived as temporary, instrumental and (more often than not) embarrassing – something to be reduced at a minimum, interrupted as soon as possible and substituted by a solitude dedicated exclusively to one's personal enjoyment. One's wife, for instance, is not a lifelong companion or a permanent partner:

“Nous n'avons pas fait marché, en nous mariant, de nous tenir continuellement accouez l'un à l'autre, comme je ne scay quels petits animaux que nous voyons” (III, 9, 954)

A family, in general, is something that you have to set in motion and then to abandon as soon as it could move independently:

*Adrian Paul Iliescu*

“Il est mieux temps d’abandonner sa famille quand on l’a mise en train de continuer sans nous” (III, 9, 952)

Old age provides a telling illustration of the fact that familial relationships are bound to bring more trouble than help:

“vous souffrez pour autrui, ou autrui pour vous; l’un et l’autre inconvenient est poissant” [pesant – my note, A.P.I.] (III, 9, 965)

Solitude is then obviously preferable. As to children, Montaigne frankly confesses:

“Aussi n’ay-je pointcette forte liaison qu’on dict attacher les hommes à l’advenir par les enfans qui portent leur nom et leur honneur (III, 9, 977)

Focussing upon the present instant and the pleasures it could bring, the *jouisseur* isolates himself not only from the future, but also from all the other people, including his children, who do represent important links between himself and the infinite web of life and history, or channels through which his ephemeral being could somehow extend its traces.

Montaigne’s exasperation with any link connecting him with others is finally proved by his insistence, not only upon living alone, but also on *dying alone*. Again, the argument is that the presence of others brings more inconvenience than comfort:

“S’il se tire quelque commodité de cette assistance, il s’en tire cent incommoditéz [...] l’un tourmente vos yeux, l’autre vos oreilles, l’autre la bouche; il n’y a sens ny membre qu’on ne vous fracasse. Le coeur vous serre de pitié d’ouyr les plaintes des amis [...] Je me contente d’une morte recueillie en soy,

quiete et solitaire, toute mienne, convenable a ma vie retirée et privée” (III, 9, 956)

There is a suggestion, in the fragment above, about a certain emotional incapacity, a confession about being unable to bear his friends’ crying. This might create the feeling that the solitude Montaigne preaches is just a *personal refuge*, needed simply because the thinker has an adolescent incapacity to endure others’ suffering. But, once again, that is not all. In fact, Montaigne is preoccupied by a much more general difficulty: each of us has too heavy a burden to carry (the burden of one’s own suffering) to be able to engage in helping others:

“j’ay assez affaire à me consoler sans avoir à consoler autruy” (III, 9, 957)

The option for solitude is thus the ‘rational’ (i.e., prescribed by reason, in the modern times) solution to a situation in which every human being feels *overwhelmed by the task of comforting himself*: not just a skeptical thinker (a cynic even) like Montaigne, but everyone is bound to seek solitude, because everyone is overwhelmed by the huge burden of taking care of himself.

“Nostre mort ne nous faisait pas assez de peur, chargeons nous encore de celle de nos femmes, de nos enfants et de nos gens. Nos affaires ne nous donnoient pas assez de peine, prenons encore à nous tourmenter et rompre la teste de ceux de nos voisins et amis” (I, 39, 236).

The moral is simple: one has to abandon all these (unnecessary) obligations and live exclusively through himself and for himself.

*Adrian Paul Iliescu*

“il faut desnoïer ces obligations si fortes, et meshuy aimer ce-  
cy et cela, mais n’espouser rien que soy”, because “la plus  
grande chose du monde, c’est de scavoir estre à soy” (I, 39,  
236).

On one hand, what we have here is the familiar apology of self-  
centeredness, connected with (or justified by) a certain exasperation,  
due to the permanent pressure which others (and their problems) put  
upon us:

“C’est assez vescu pour autruy, vivons pour nous au moins ce  
but de la vie. Ramenons à nous et à nostre aise nos pensées et  
nos intentions” (I, 39, 236).

Someone might think that this exasperation is justified by the  
abusive interference of an authoritarian society into the privacy of  
every individual. Indeed, Montaigne complains about those ‘rules of  
the game’ which diminished the area of privacy, compelling one to  
live too much in the public sphere:

“La plus part des reigles et preceptes du monde prennent ce  
train de nous pousser hors de nous et chasser en la place, à  
l’usage de la société publique” (III, 10, 983).

But the impression that Montaigne’s argumentation amounts in  
fact to nothing else than a defence of privacy and a rejection of abusive  
public interference is plainly wrong. What he actually does is not to  
argue for an adequate dividing line between *public* and *private*,  
between general and personal interest or between common and  
individual good. The very idea of such a dividing line would have  
implied a recognition of the double attachment of any individual:  
both to himself and to society. This, in turn, would have constituted

an acknowledgement of the fact that any human being fundamentally depends upon others (be they members of his family or his compatriots). Or, this is exactly what Montaigne is eager to deny. His main aim is to prove that a wise human being does not depend upon anything that is outside him: all that is outside us must be seen and treated as a contingent instrument for our happiness, not as something upon which this happiness actually depends. This is clearly stated in (perhaps) the most famous fragment of *De la Solitude*, the one in which the idea of *arrière boutique* is introduced:

“Il faut avoir femmes, enfants, biens, et surtout de la santé, qui peut; mais non pas s’y attacher en manière que nostre heur en despende. Il faut reserver une arrière boutique toute nostre, tout franche, en laquelle nous établissons nostre vraye liberté et principale retraicte et solitude” (I, 39, 235).

Here we have Montaigne’s basic theme: *the Other as mere Ornament*, i.e. as something (nice, possibly) which can be added to, but which does not actually belong to, the very essence of one’s life: for, remember, we are born “libre et desliez”.

It would be mistaken to take this well-known passage as a modern reformulation of the old Stoic principle asking us, fatalistically, to be always prepared to give up all the good things in life, if necessary (like sailors who descend on a charming island and enjoy their stay there, but who should be ready to leave it, and to abandon instantly all the marvelous things they enjoy, at the first call of their captain – as the ancient wisdom put it).

Montaigne is not saying simply that, although we need so much the outer world (a family, friends, goods, or a country), we have no other choice than to give them up, when needed, because we cannot

fight our own destiny. He does not claim that other people belong to our (normal) existence, but we have to be prepared to cope with the adversities of fate and live alone, when that becomes unavoidable. He actually goes much further than that. What he says is, in fact, that we do not really need anything in the outer world, and that we do not lose anything when abandoning it:

“l’homme d’entendement n’a rien perdu, s’il a soy mesme” (I, 39, 235).

Other people (the members of one’s family included) are just an ornament of our life; it’s alright if we can afford them, but we do not really lose something important when losing them. Moreover, they often bring more trouble than pleasure. That is why we could and should retreat in ourselves and live exclusively for ourselves: because all that is important for us is *inside us*, whereas everything which is outside us is not really significant, but only instrumentally (and thus contingently) useful. And precisely this characteristic of *l’humaine condition* (the expression is to be found in III, 2, 782) justifies what Montaigne calls ‘true solitude’, and which is co-extensive with ‘true happiness’:

“il faut ramener et retirer en soy: c’est la vraie solitude” (I, 39, 234).

This mentioning of the ‘true solitude’ as a normal state in which one goes back to oneself proves that, with Montaigne, we are not simply in the middle of a *culture of self-sufficiency*: we are first of all in the middle of a *culture of solitude*, for it is a confidence in the essential solitude of man that justifies the belief in self-sufficiency. One’s returning to oneself, or one’s retiring into oneself, means one’s returning to one’s own ‘true solitude’; being oneself is thus identified

with being solitary, and precisely because your solitude does not affect the wholeness of your being, but only confirms it, you can be self-sufficient. You are autonomous and self-sufficient to the extent that returning to your solitude implies losing absolutely nothing.

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To sum up: for Montaigne, solitude is not the result of the search for autonomy and self-sufficiency, but rather their pre-condition. Solitude appears as the *normal state* of any human being, and self-sufficiency is just one of the advantages one has in this state; but one has to realise that this is one's 'true' situation or position in the world, and to go back to it. And this interpretation is important, among others, because it proves that Montaigne's conclusions were not the result of some personal contingencies.

His plea for solitude does not simply spring from his failure in public or personal life, nor from other personal contingencies. Even if such contingencies created a favourable context for it, what makes Montaigne's solitude inevitable is *his reaction to them*, i.e. his decision to retreat and live exclusively through and for himself. It is this option for solitude which proves to be decisive in starting his efforts to reach autonomy and independence. Montaigne has not discovered any new means of achieving autonomy, he does not feel himself as the beneficiary of a newly obtained, modern, independence – this is why he keeps imploring: “Combien je supplie instamment sa sainte misericorde que jamais je ne doive un essentiel grammercy à personne!” (III, 9, 946). Montaigne does not present his own autonomy as a result of progress, or of some existential resources which had recently become available. He speaks about it either in connection with some personal characteristics (like having no need of foreign inputs) or by relating it to eternal human resources (“we are richer

than we think..."). Solitude thus appears neither as the side-effect of, nor as the reaction to, a certain emancipatory change in the basic human condition. It is rather the other way round: the need for an emancipatory change comes precisely from a new kind of solitude experienced by the modern soul, a solitude which inspires the attempt of autonomisation as an adaptive effort. What seems to be basic is the new feeling of not being able to bear the presence of others, the pressure of their concerns, the chaos and noise of public life and the incompatibilities between the Self and the Other. This brings solitude and its advantages to the forefront, and it is Montaigne's sense of isolation (fortified by metaphysical convictions concerning the *essential solitude* of any human being) that seems to inspire his plea for autonomy, and not his belief in the advantages of autonomy (which nevertheless is present too) that leads to the acceptance of isolation. The deepest source of all his arguments and attitudes seems to be a *typical mentality of the solitary*, not a robust confidence in independence. He does not suggest that we have to accept solitude as a means to achieve autonomy, neither that solitude is the price to be paid for independence; if he said that, he would have had to insist that independence is more important than sociability – which was the proof that the loss created by solitude is smaller than the gain brought by independence. But Montaigne does not take this path; he serenely ignores the banal debates on *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. He seems to think in a different way: being oneself means being solitary (proof: returning to oneself means regaining one's own solitude); and, since by being solitary one does not lose anything, it follows that one is self-sufficient, autonomous or independent. This conviction remains a basic characteristic of the modern way of seeing the self, to be expressed in numerous ways and in many places; in its most synthetic form, perhaps, it can be found in Leopold von Andrian's *fin du siècle* formula: "so einsam und so selbst genug" (*Der Garten der Erkenntnis*).

## IV. Descartes: Cognitive Individualism as Expression of Intellectual Solitude

“comme un homme qui marche seul  
et dans les ténèbres...”

DESCARTES, *Discours de la méthode*

Descartes has always been praised for having opened the way of intellectual individualism, i.e. for having emancipated individual, independent, thinking from the ‘tyranny’ of public, received, knowledge. His commentators have done nothing else, in this respect, than to adopt the way in which he himself had presented his own achievements, for, on the very first page of his *La recherche de la vérité par la lumière naturelle*,<sup>11</sup> Descartes claims to have provided “à un chacun les moyens de trouver en soi-même, et sans rien emprunter d’autrui, toute la science qui lui est nécessaire à la conduite de sa vie”. This is, in important respects, an illusion, as many thinkers - some of whom no less famous than Nietzsche or Wittgenstein - have argued; but I shall not, of course, discuss here whether, or the extent to which, this characterisation can be accepted; what really matters, in the present context, is the fact that Descartes appears to be *the exemplary hero* of intellectual individualism, i.e. of modern intellectual emancipation. This makes him a splendid target for critique: if the champion of individualism himself proves to be a champion of solitude, then we have a good case against the self-praising autobiography of modernity.

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<sup>11</sup> Descartes, *Oeuvres philosophiques*, Alquié, Éd. Garnier, 1967, tome II, p.1105.

The argumentation can start from an elementary, but nevertheless basic, fact: the first step, in Descartes' enterprise of founding cognitive individualism, is not one of *self-assertion* but rather one of *separation* and *retreat*. The new method, by which individual minds can work independently, without having to rely upon any other source of knowledge than what can be found in themselves, is a latecomer in his approach: so to say, *at the beginning there was not an option for autonomy, but only one for isolation*.

This should be quite obvious for any reader of the famous *Discours de la Méthode*. Descartes does not start by asserting his autonomy; on the contrary, it could be said that his first attitude is one of humility. Immediately after expressing confidence that his activity was "bonne et importante", he hastens to admit that he can be wrong - "il se peut faire que je me trompe" – and states his readiness to learn from others' reactions to his work: "apprenant du bruit commun les opinions qu'on en aura, ce soit un nouveau moyen de m'instruire".<sup>12</sup> In such a remark, there is, of course, an implicit praise of intellectual cooperation, not one of self-reliance.

And the tone of humility does not disappear soon. Describing the poor result of his studies - "je me trouvais embarrassé de tant de doutes et d'erreurs" (p. 571) - and his disappointment - "il n'y avait aucune doctrine dans le monde qui fût telle qu'on m'avait auparavant fait espérer" (p.572) – Descartes already makes an allusion to the emancipatory inclination of "prendre la liberté de juger par moi de tous les autres" (idem): but he modestly justifies this inclination only by encouragement coming from the fact that other people did not

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<sup>12</sup> René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, in *Oeuvres philosophiques*, (The Alquié edition), Éditions Garnier, 1963, tome I, p. 570-571. From now on, I shall refer to various fragments in this work by simply specifying the page number, as long as I do not mention another Cartesian work.

take him as inferior to his colleagues: “je ne voyais point qu’on m’estimait inférieur à mes condisciples” (p. 572). At this initial stage, it is not autonomy that seems to characterize him, but rather the attention he paid to others’ opinions.

But even later, at the crucial moment of choice, Descartes does not appear as driven by an impulse towards autonomy; his first big step is rather dictated by a desire to isolate himself from an intellectual world haunted of errors, doubts, delusions and sterility. The formal sciences, although well founded, are somehow irrelevant, for “on n’avait rien bâti dessus de plus élevé” (p. 575). The moral sciences, “au contraire”, seem to offer a lot - “des palais fort superbes” - but what they offer is in fact groundless: the palaces “n’étaient bâtis que sur du sable et de la boue” (p.575). In philosophy, “il ne s’y trouve encore aucune chose dont on ne dispute, et par conséquent qui ne soit douteuse” (p.576), and this harmful doubtfulness spreads itself into all the other sciences, which have philosophical foundations, so that “on ne pouvait avoir rien bâti, qui fût solide, sur des fondements si peu fermes” (p. 576). Finally, it is not only the great number of shortcomings, but also the great number of frauds which threatens one’s mind:

“pour les mauvaises doctrines, je pensais déjà connaître assez ce qu’elles valaient, pour n’être plus sujet à être trompé, ni par les promesses d’un alchimiste, ni par les prédictions d’un astrologue, ni par les impostures d’un magicien, ni par les artifices ou la vanterie d’aucun de ceux qui font profession de savoir plus qu’il ne savent” (p. 576).

It is thus this discouraging state of affairs in the field of knowledge that pushes Descartes to make his big choice of abandoning scholarly studies and of retiring into himself in order “de ne chercher plus

d'autre science, qu celle qui se pourrait trouver en moi-même, ou bien dans le grand livre du monde" (p. 577). But if that is so, then the primacy of an impulse towards autonomy is out of the question. Descartes does not seem to be motivated by a particular attachment to independence and self-sufficiency: his main concern is to prevent himself from falling prey to error, uncertainty and fraud. His decision can hardly be called a free option for autonomy; it is less an example of self-assertion, and more an attempt to escape from a dangerous and disappointing realm, in which most of the other people are prisoners. This attempt does not yet have the appearance of a freely-chosen, mature and specific, emancipatory strategy – it is just an act of self-protection through separation: Descartes dissociates himself from what he now thinks not to be true and useful knowledge. And his act of separation seems to be the result of disappointment and disillusion, an act to which he has been constrained by a certain unsatisfactory situation, not by a revolutionary discovery.

This aspect of Descartes' break with received knowledge has not remained unnoticed. As an excellent expert like Alquié remarks in a footnote to the book, when referring to the picture of human knowledge given in the *Discours*:

“À la fin d'un pareil tableau, on reste persuadé que le doute ne fut seulement, chez Descartes, volontaire et méthodique. Descartes, en sa jeunesse, et à la fin de ses études, a connu un doute spontané et profond, une véritable déception” (p. 576).

It is thus quite clear that the initial step of the Cartesian emancipatory enterprise has not been inspired by a new, modern, ideal of autonomy, but rather by a strong disillusionment: exactly as Montaigne is disappointed by public life and by the attitudes of other people, Descartes is disappointed by public (received) knowledge

and by the false certainties of other people. Both decide to opt out, from their respective communities: social life, in one case, official knowledge, in the other; in both cases, what we are dealing with is an option for solitary ways. Also, in both cases the first aim does not seem to have been *the discovery of a new way* (of conducting one's life and, respectively, of conducting one's intellect); 'founding fathers' like Montaigne and Descartes have been 'pushed', as it were, to take new ways by the incompatibilities they experienced between their environment (social or intellectual) and their own aspirations. And precisely such incompatibilities are the usual source of solitude, as they prompt a decision *not to mix up* with others any more.

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Now, it can, of course, be objected that Descartes' personal intellectual history does not matter very much. Some would say that his initial reasons are not really important, especially as compared to the significance of his invention of a very fruitful *methodic doubt*. It might be something in this, and that is why I shall now deal with the logic aspect of *dubito*, instead of relying mainly upon the historic aspects.

The above objection fails, I think, because the logical priorities implied by Descartes' methodic doubt do not differ from the historic ones. Exactly as, from the point of view of his personal history, the decision to separate himself from public knowledge precedes the discovery of his *dubito* method, from a logical point of view the premise "I doubt everything" (the decision to take everything as doubtful) precedes the discovery of the first certain conclusions and of the efficacy of the instrument constituted by methodic doubt. But this premise or initial decision, being one of 'bracketing' all received knowledge or of refusing to adhere to any common conviction, is

nothing else than an *option for isolating one's own mind from any usual, but unreliable, piece of knowledge* and of turning it towards itself. By 'bracketing' all received knowledge, the mind turns to itself or retires into itself (only to discover that it simply doubts everything). The mind closes itself, so to say, to any assertion coming from 'the outside' (from experience, or from previous processes of thought) and concentrates upon what happens 'inside itself', upon its own general doubt; it retreats from the world of received knowledge into its own inner (present) 'core', where it only finds the thought "I doubt everything".

In this respect, what Descartes' Ego (or mind) does here is perfectly analogous to what Montaigne recommends to individuals: it retires into its own *arrière boutique*, in order to seek there the certainties which were not available in the 'outer' world of public knowledge. It is as if the Mind (put to work by Descartes) would have followed all the advices given by Montaigne: the advice of "ramener et retirer en soy", or the one recommending a break of all links ("desprenons nous de toutes les liaisons qui nous attachent à autrui"); understanding that "il faut seul s'ecarter de la troupe et entreprendre seul", the Mind seems to have turned upon itself, in perfect accord with the example proudly evoked in the *Essais* ("je me roule en moy mesme").

There is, then, a correspondence between the *historic step* of Descartes and the *logic step* Mind takes. And the correspondence between the biographical priority (of abandoning public knowledge, over discovering the *cogito*), and the logical priority (of doubting everything, over discovering the first certainty) is not just a coincidence; there is no accident here, of course, but a necessary ordering; for the refusal of the mind to accept any 'received' piece of knowledge does not only facilitate the new intellectual autonomy – it generates it, in fact. The step taken by the Mind, as if it followed the

strategy proposed by Montaigne, is not contingent and eliminable: it is the very foundation of the method proposed, and it is the source of its fruitfulness. What makes Descartes' discovery possible is precisely his rejection of all traditional knowledge: it is precisely because he doubts everything, that he manages to reach a conclusion that is not doubtful at all ("I doubt everything, therefore I cannot doubt the fact that I am doubting"). Thus, the *rejection* of the traditional, 'communitarian', knowledge appears as the basic precondition for finding the new, individualist, way of thinking.

It is now visible the way in which the Cartesian decision *to take a lonely way* precedes his option for autonomy, both logically and historically: before discovering the possibility of a complete individual foundation of knowledge, before discovering his new method, Descartes had opted out from the intellectual community. Before being able to find an autonomous method of knowledge and a self-sufficient way of establishing certainties, he had to be able to abandon all the (un)certainties inherited from other people. Thus, isolation could not be the result of a newly discovered autonomy; on the contrary, it was autonomy which could and did result from isolation.

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And this is exactly the story told by Descartes: a story about disappointment (produced by the other men), refusal (of dialogue), retreat (in a personal world).

From the very beginning of the *Discours*, Descartes confesses his disappointment with (nothing less than) *all the activities of all men*: "regardant d'un oeil de philosophe les diverses actions et entreprises de tous les hommes, il n'y avait quasi aucune qui ne me semble vaine et inutile" (p.570).

It is of course the same with the theories created by others: “il n’y avait aucune doctrine dans le monde qui fût telle qu’on m’avait auparavant espérer” (p. 572). This universal disappointment which haunts Descartes is what breaks the links between him and the other people, making him *unable to share anything with them*; according to his confession, it is precisely this incapacity of joining others that compels him to adopt a solitary way:

“je ne pouvais choisir personne dont les opinions me semblassent devoir être préférées à celles des autres et je me trouvais comme contraint d’entreprendre moi-même de me conduire” (p. 584).

The failure to share is also alluded to at the end of part III: nine years passed “avant que j’eusse encore pris aucun parti”(p. 600). It is also extremely telling the way in which Descartes describes his own situation, as determined by this incapacity to adhere to others’ opinions. There is no suggestion of heroic attempts to reach intellectual autonomy; on the contrary, what seems to be implied is *the helplessness of the solitary*, his fears and concerns comparable to the ones produced by darkness:

“Mais, comme un homme qui marche seul et dans les ténèbres, je me résous d’aller si lentement, et d’user de tant de circonspection en toute choses, que, si je n’avançais que fort peu, je me garderais bien, au moins, de tomber” (p. 584).

True enough, he immediately adds that he had avoided any radical rejection of the common convictions, having had the intention of putting them first to the test, by using “la vraie méthode” to be discovered by his own mind. But even if this confirmed a certain priority of the search for “la vraie méthode” over the ‘radical doubt’

(as Alquié claims in a footnote on the same page, controversially enough, in my opinion), it certainly does not show that the ambition of becoming autonomous had preceded his intellectual solitude: on the contrary, this only confirms that it was his solitude, i.e. his incapacity to join others in their convictions, that stimulated him to look for an independent and personal way of assessing ideas – Descartes feels an intense need of finding the ‘true method’ of verification precisely because he cannot trust the existing ideas and methods, because he cannot share them.

His confessed social conformism does not affect this state of affairs in a significant manner. The rule he adopts - “d’obéir aux lois et aux coutumes de mon pays” (p. 592) - is far from disproving his essential solitude. Not only that the decision of adopting this rule can safely be attributed to the care he takes to do nothing dangerous to religion or to the state (“que je pusse imaginer être préjudiciable ni à la religion ni à l’État” – p. 633). But, what is much more important, all the justifications he brings in support to this decision show *some pragmatic reasons at work, and not a true personal adherence*. There were indeed several good practical grounds for accepting laws and rules of morality: the first one, already alluded to, was that obedience helped him to avoid any open conflict with (both spiritual and political) authorities; a second one was that moral obedience provided a sort of temporary and provisional guiding logic, necessary until his own personal convictions would crystallize – one needs a temporary house in which to live (“où on puisse être logé commodément pendant le temps qu’on y travaillera” – p. 591) until one builds one’s own new house. A third reason seems to have been his conclusion, based upon experience, that, in the field of manners, it proves sometimes necessary to accept as true opinions which are very uncertain:

“J’avais dès longtemps remarqué que, pour les moeurs, il est besoin quelquefois de suivre des opinions qu’on sait être fort incertaines, tout de même que si elles étaient indubitables” (p. 602).

A fourth reason, perhaps not unconnected with the third, is that, given the variety of moral opinions, any bringing into question of the established rules could have produced a total chaos: in such a case, “il se pourrait trouver autant des réformateurs que de têtes” (p. 633).

But all these reasons were purely pragmatical ones; they did not imply any true intellectual adherence from Descartes’ part and they did not diminish his solitude. On the contrary: the more carefully he observed the moral rules, the more able he became to reject other received convictions and to dissociate himself from them. And Descartes realized that moral obedience made it possible for him to break free from the world of public opinions: precisely the formal maintaining of all moral and legal links to the Establishment allowed him to break all his links with other people’s opinions:

“Après m’être ainsi assuré de ces maximes, et les avoires mises à part, avec les vérités de la foi, qui ont toujours été les premières en ma créance, je jugeai que, pour tout le reste de mes opinions, je pouvais librement entreprendre de m’en défaire” (p. 598).

Thus, even when Descartes decides to adopt the moral opinions coming from other people, or from other sources, in any case from ‘outside’ him, he insists upon accepting them despite their doubtfulness and for purely practical reasons. It is not a matter of truly *joining* the others in what they think or of really *sharing* their convictions; it is just a matter of superficial conformism, a conformism that provided the quietness needed for his enterprise. That Descartes’ acceptance of a common ground with his fellow humans was only a

matter of practical convenience is clearly proved by the way he selects the moral opinions he adopts: “entre plusieurs opinions également reçues, je ne choisissais que les plus modérées; tant à cause que ce sont toujours les plus commodes pour la pratique, et vraisemblablement les meilleurs, tout excès ayant coutume d’être mauvais” (p. 594). Thus, when he decides not to break links with others, Descartes is only seeking the instruments “les plus commodes pour la pratique”. The common links are purely instrumental. Their presence does not affect his fundamental solitude, nor his conviction that he did not have to be content with others’ opinions (“je n’eusse pas cru me devoir contenter des opinions d’autrui” – p. 598). The existence of a common ground - the acceptance of the usual moral rules - is nothing more than a useful component of the framework needed for him in order to be able to go his lonely way.

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“vivre aussi solitaire et retiré  
que dans les déserts les plus  
écartés...”

*Discours*, end of part III

A subsidiary, but not uninteresting, remark concerning this framework, is that it also includes *physical isolation* as a component. He tries to avoid the places where acquaintances could run into him: he decides “à m’éloigner de tous les lieux où je pouvais avoir des connaissances” (p. 601). And the very idea of abandoning all the received opinions and of erecting his own cognitive building (“de bâtir dans un fonds qui est tout à moi” – p. 582) comes to his mind in a context of solitude: when being in Germany, with no distracting conversation (“aucune conversation qui me divertît” – p. 579), so that he could remain the whole day long alone, at home: “je demeurais

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tout le jour enfermé seul dans un poêle, où j'avais tout loisir de m'entretenir de mes pensées" (p. 579). It is symbolic, although of course not decisive, that it is in this framework that Descartes decide "de se défaire de toutes les opinions qu'on a reçues auparavant..." (p. 583).

The solitary atmosphere which seems to surround Descartes during the time of his discovery of the *dubito*, is not, of course, purely accidental. Descartes had sought solitude as the right framework for his project, and it is important to see that his option for *physical isolation* follows from his belief in the virtues of intellectual isolation.

Physical isolation meant isolation from his contemporaries or from 'society'. Rejecting the presence of others (rejecting company) meant, in turn, at least two things: renouncing any possible benefit which could have come from others (renouncing any help from 'strangers') and renouncing dialogue with his contemporaries. None of these consequences was disagreeable to Descartes: he not only accepted both of them, but he also produced several arguments meant to justify them.

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"s'il y a quelque'un qui en  
soit capable, ce doit être  
plutôt moi qu'aucun autre..."  
*Discours*, part VI

As to possible help from others for the foundational enterprise he was engaged in, it is obvious that, given his thesis that a single-author work is superior to (i.e., more perfect than) works produced by several ones - a thesis defended at the beginning of the second part of the

*Discours*, and to which I shall come back later - there was no need of many more arguments: rejecting help, Descartes was only illustrating his theory that solitary creation is preferable to cooperative authorship, because it leads to more perfection. Nevertheless, he addressed the issue explicitly and advanced new arguments for his solitary way.

One of these is that, since it was himself who started the research, no one else could continue it as it should be continued – others simply could not grasp or conceive the task as well as himself. If anybody is capable of fulfilling this task, then

“ce doit être plutôt moi qu’aucune autre: non pas qu’il ne puisse y avoir au monde plusieurs esprits incomparablement meilleurs que le mien; mais pour ce qu’on ne saurait si bien concevoir une chose, et la rendre sienne, lorsqu’on l’invente soi-même” (p. 641).

So what we have is the following situation: Descartes started alone his research because he had become aware that a single-author work attains more perfection than a cooperative work; later, his theory had to remain an one-author creation, because nobody else could understand (and thus continue) it as well as himself. After a long critique of contemporary scholarship, he then insists that, by having done the work already accomplished, he has acquired an ability of making discoveries (“l’habitude et la facilité, que je pense avoir, d’en trouver toujours de nouvelles” – p.643-644), and thereby justifies the conclusion that

“s’il y a au monde quelque ouvrage qui ne puisse être si bien achevé par aucun autre que par le même qui l’a commencé, c’est celui auquel je travaille” (p. 644).

This sounds more like an emphatic expression of some deep personal conviction than like a true argument; it has the appearance of being the expression of a strong attachment. But even if it has some persuasive force, and works as an argument to some extent, it certainly does not prove the uselessness of cooperation. The contribution of the initial author (who best understands the newly invented method) is essential, all right, but why wouldn't others join him in a collective effort to develop the method? Descartes feels a vulnerable point here. He consequently tries to fortify his position, by adding some extra reasons against cooperation. It can be said - he concedes - that, "comme plusieurs peuvent plus voir qu'un homme seul" (p. 640), other people could be of some help, at least by raising useful objections. But,

*"encore que je me reconnoisse extrêmement sujet à faillir, et que je ne fie quasi jamais aux premières pensées qui me viennent, toutefois l'expérience que j'ai des objections qu'on me peut faire m'empêche d'en espérer aucun profit: car j'ai déjà souvent éprouvé les jugements, tant de ceux que j'ai tenus pour mes amis, que de quelques autres à qui je pensais être indifférent, et même aussi de quelques-uns dont je savais que la malignité et l'envie tâcheraient assez de découvrir ce que l'affection cacherait à mes amis; mais il est rarement arrivé qu'on m'ait objecté quelque chose que je n'eusse point du tout prévue, si ce n'est qu'elle fût fort éloignée de mon sujet; en sorte que je n'ai quasi jamais rencontré aucun censeur de mes opinions, qui ne me semblât ou moins rigoureux, ou moins équitable que moi-même"* (p. 640).

Here we have, at last, the true reason of Descartes' refusal of cooperation: he does not really think that others could help him - his conviction is that he would already be aware of (or familiar with)

anything some one else could have to say to him, for no one else is as rigorous and objective as himself.

*This conviction clearly proves a certain intellectual solitude; for, as long as he feels that neither his friends, nor his enemies could say something new, something relevant and well-grounded to him, Descartes cannot help but experience intellectual loneliness. He is not really able to have a *dialogue* with others; he can only develop a monologue, in their presence, and I shall show later that his posture is indeed that of someone who is immersed in a monologue.*

It is true that he develops also arguments pertaining more to his aspiration towards individual efficiency, and thus to a 'healthy' individualism. For instance, when he recognizes sometimes that for his experiments some help might be needed: "pour ce qui est des expériences qui peuvent y servir, un homme seul ne saurait suffire à les faire toutes" (p. 644). But, as a modern scientist, Descartes is interested in the efficient use of his research time; or, cooperation with those who want to learn something would cost too much (the price to be paid for their help would be too high: such people must be paid "par l'explication de quelques difficultés, ou du moins par des compliments et des entretiens inutiles, qui ne lui sauraient coûter si peu de temps qu'il ne perdît" – p. 644); and cooperation with people who claim to have contributed somehow (by making their own investigations or experiments) would also cost too much, for their contributions would be confused and mixed up with superfluous elements, or perhaps simply wrong; and even if some elements in them were good, "elles ne pourraient derechef valoir le temps qu'il lui faudrait employer à les choisir" (p. 644). The conclusion is that what other people could do is only to pay the costs of research and to protect its author from intruders (p. 645).

Although in contexts like this one the focus is upon efficiency and independence, rather than upon isolation, it is clear that the whole

background of the discussion is one of intellectual loneliness. The picture is clear: cooperation is impossible because there is simply nobody Descartes could cooperate with; the people around cannot be partners (but only servants or sponsors), and that is why he must go on alone. It is this conviction that there can be nobody to cooperate with that isolates him.

There are some fragments, though, in which Descartes praises cooperation and even asks for it; these are very few, as Alquié confirms in his comments to the text (“Ce thème este chez lui fort rare” – p. 635), but they must, nevertheless, be taken into consideration.

One thing seems to have really bothered him, indicating how useful some help from others could be: the huge number of experiments which (he felt) were needed for his ample foundational project; not being, of course, able to make all these experiments alone, he came to be very anxious: “voyant tous les jours de plus en plus le retardement que souffre le dessein que j’ai de m’instruire, à cause d’une infinité d’expériences dont j’ai besoin, et qu’il est impossible que je fasse sans l’aide d’autrui” (p.646). This complaint could create the feeling that Descartes was not averse at all to cooperation; and such a feeling could only become stronger, when one noticed insistent requests like: “je supplie tous ceux qui auront quelques objections à y faire de prendre la peine de les envoyer à mon libraire, par lequel en étant averti, je tâcherai d’y joindre ma réponse en même temps” (p. 646-647).

But a more careful look at the context in which such (uncharacteristic, for Descartes) attitudes are expressed would soon show that he was not really asking for cooperation. A hint, in this direction, is his skepticism about the kind of help which could have been expected from others, a skepticism already alluded to, and clearly stated in the same context (pp. 640-645). This part of the *Discours* seems to be dominated by a contradictory attitude: Descartes appears aware of some possible advantages of intellectual cooperation with

others, and, at the same time, clearly convinced that this collaboration would not be cognitively fruitful (see especially p. 645, the idea quoted above). But then, why does he ask for the contribution of others? The answer is simple, and quite explicit: Descartes wants to protect himself from the possible critique of having neglected that contribution and of having jeopardized his own project by refusing it. After stating explicitly that, in his opinion, other people could only help by providing money and by “empêcher que son loisir ne lui fût ôté par l’importunité de personne” (p. 645), he confesses his two reasons for getting in touch with the public; one is his concern about his own reputation: although, as he insists, he had not been particularly interested in being famous, “je n’ai pu empêcher que je n’acquise quelque sorte de réputation” and, once having it, “j’ai pensé que je devais faire mon mieux pour m’exempter au moins de l’avoir mauvaise” (p.646); the second reason is that, given his difficulties with the experiments which were needed, he wanted (not the help of others, but) to avoid the possible reproach of having failed because of his neglect of the contribution that other people could have made to his project:

“je ne veux pas aussi me défaillir tant à moi-même, que de donner sujet à ceux qui me survivront de me reprocher quelque jour, que j’eusse pu leur laisser plusieurs choses beaucoup meilleures que je n’aurait fait, si je n’eusse point trop négligé de leur faire entendre en quoi ils pouvaient contribuer à mes desseins” (p. 646).

Things are thus quite clear: when Descartes asks for help, he does not really mean it; he rather wants to protect himself from later accusations. His conviction is not that the objections raised by others could contribute to an improvement of his own ideas – it is simply that a debate would show *what he himself achieved*: “ce que je puis, ou ne puis pas, dans les sciences” (p. 646).

Descartes could not, of course, openly deny the possibility of some others' contribution to the improvement of his own conclusions, for such a denial would have amounted to confessing a belief in his own infallibility. He is very eager to exclude the suspicion that he had entertained such a belief ("je me reconnaisse extrêmement sujet à faillir" - p. 640), and he insists both upon his possible failure ("il se peut faire que je me trompe, et ce n'est peut-être qu'un peu de cuivre et de verre que prends pour de l'or et des diamants" - p. 570) and upon the possible superiority of others: "non pas qu'il ne puisse y avoir au monde plusieurs esprits incomparablement meilleurs que le mien" (p. 641).

But he was clearly convinced that he had discovered the big key by which the door of true, certain, knowledge can be opened and the main secrets unveiled ("Je vous en découvrirai les secrets..." is his promise in *La recherche* – p.1114). And, once one has become the victim of this mythology of *the magic key just discovered* and of *the big secret just unveiled*, one can hardly accept improvements coming from others any more. It is in 'the logic of things', that is, in the logic of this way of thinking things: a key (once discovered) does not appear to be the kind of thing that needs improvement, a secret (once unveiled) does not seem to be in need of perfecting. One who has had the chance of making a discovery does not appear as one who needs help from others: his position is that of a man who can convey the Truth to others, that of a teacher, not that of a man who would ask for help. And it is precisely this posture that Descartes prefers – for he has something to teach: "lesquelles choses je me suis proposé d'enseigner en cet ouvrage..." (*La recherche*, p.1106). One could say that his solitude is also the solitude of a Prophet or of a Teacher of humanity, who has nothing to learn and to debate with others, but only something to impart. That explains why he is content with what he already knows ("je n'ai plus de passion pour apprendre

aucune chose et que je suis aussi content du peu de connaissance que j'ai" – *La Recherche*, p. 1110); what he masters is not just a part of human knowledge, similar to other parts mastered by other people ("la science de mes voisins ne borne pas la mienne, ainsi comme leurs terres font ici tout autour le peu que je possède" – p. 1110), but a magic method that needs nothing else than itself. If, at the beginning of his attempts, Descartes enjoyed the solitude of "un homme qui marche seul et dans les ténèbres" (*Discours*, p.584), now, after discovering 'the key', he enjoys the solitude of a Teacher: he is there not in order to participate, but just to unveil the big secret, while all the others are there not in order to contribute, but to learn.

Is this a final proof that Descartes' lack of interest in cooperation is in fact an objective, positional, element, determined by real achievements which make cooperation superfluous? Is it true that this lack of interest has nothing to do with personal isolation or solitude? Not at all. His inclination towards isolation is proved by the fact that even when he is not in the position of teaching others, but in a situation in which perhaps some help would be useful, and should also be welcome, his reaction is one of retreat. Descartes confesses that he had once intended to publish his work, being grateful to all those who desired "tant à me communiquer celles [i.e., the investigations – my note, A.P.I.] qu'ils ont déjà faites, qu'à m'aider en la recherche de celles qui restent à faire" (*Discours*, p. 638). But this intention has quickly been abandoned, for several reasons among which disappointment with his own ideas: "les choses qui m'ont semblé vraies lorsque j'ai commencé à les concevoir, m'ont paru fausses lorsque je les ai voulu mettre sur le papier (p. 638).

Now, it is interesting to see what a man who "marche seul et dans les ténèbres" does when having such an unpleasant surprise. The answer is this: he abandons any attempt to communicate, he

retires in his solitude, attempting to rethink again everything, and consoles himself with the idea that, if not his contemporaries, then their sons would be those who certainly could reap profit from his (improved) reasonings. Why doesn't he even try to benefit from what others could have to say about his work, from intellectual help coming through objections or suggestions? The main reason is telling: he simply does not want to lose time with the debate which would follow to the publishing of his ideas. He concludes that:

*“je ne devais aucunement consentir qu'ils fussent publiés pendant ma vie, afin que ni les oppositions et controverses, auxquelles ils seraient peut-être sujets, ni même la réputation telle quelle, qu'ils me pourraient acquérir, ne me donnassent aucune occasion de perdre le temps que j'ai dessein d'employer à m'instruire” (p. 638)*

He then complains about being old: he is compelled *“à ménager le temps qui me reste”* (p. 639). But this justification is only convincing if one accepts the tacit premise that the contribution of others was not very important: that solitary thinking was conducive to much better results than a debate with his contemporaries. And this is, of course, Descartes' hidden conviction: intellectual exchange, even if useful in some ways, would not pay – the time lost with it could be better employed in solitary reflections (p. 640). Exactly like Montaigne, he prefers quietness to the public noise (and he similarly praises *“le repos”* and *“le loisir”* – see, for instance, p. 646, 650). And, even more important, exactly like his compatriot, Descartes thinks that intercourse brings more inconvenience than advantage: the time consumed in debates is too great a loss, as compared to the intellectual profit to be obtained.

The conclusion to be drawn is quite simple: Descartes, like Montaigne before him, was not a great believer in dialogue.

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“je ne désire point me brouiller...”  
*Discours, part V*

The refusal of dialogue is illustrated by several relevant fragments: in some of them, this refusal is explicit and obvious, in others some interpretation is needed in order to make it appear clearly.

As to the first category, it is Descartes' disappointment with the existing corpus of knowledge and with the intellectual Establishment that dictates his refusal to join the 'conversation' of (and with) others. He repeatedly stresses that he does not want to be involved in the scholarly controversies (“je ne désire point me brouiller” – p.613); his wish is that of being able to speak freely, without having to engage in the existing debates: “pouvoir dire plus librement ce que j'en jugeais, sans être obligé de suivre ni de réfuter les opinions qui sont reçues entre les doctes” (p. 615). The main reason for his reluctance to participate in these debates is their sterility: “je n'ai jamais remarqué non plus que, par le moyen des disputes qui se pratiquent dans les écoles, on ait découvert aucune vérité qu'on ignorât auparavant” (p. 641). Moreover, a poor opinion about the objectivity of the scholars is discouraging him: “on s'exerce bien plus à faire valoir la vraisemblance, qu'à peser les raisons de part et d'autre; et ceux qui ont été longtemps bons avocats ne sont pas pour cela, par après, meilleurs juges” (p. 641).

This is certainly an important element in Descartes' decision of isolating himself from the current intellectual conversation: “je me

résolus de laisser tout ce monde ici à leurs disputes...” (p. 615) But he is far from being disappointed only with the usual scholarly conversation. His disillusion comes from his own friends too (p. 640), and even from the best minds in his times, for:

“bien que j’aie souvent expliqué quelqu’unes de mes idées à des personnes de très bon esprit, et qui, pendant que je leur parlais, semblaient les entendre fort distinctment, toutefois, lorsqu’ils les ont redites, j’ai remarqué qu’ils les ont changées presque toujours en telle sorte que je ne les pouvais plus avouer pour miennes” (p. 641).

It is as if Descartes made an experiment concerning the possibility of communication between humans, and this proved to be a failure. Indeed, he speaks about a quite long period of time (nine years!) in which he had tried to travel and have experiences, hoping “en pouvoir mieux venir à bout, en conversant avec les hommes, qu’en demeurant plus longtemps renfermé dans le poêle” (p. 598). But the result has been, in the end, unsatisfactory: “ces neuf ans s’écoulèrent avant que j’eusse encore pris aucun parti, [...], ni commencé à chercher les fondements d’aucune philosophie plus certaine que la vulgaire” (p. 600). And it is after this failure that Descartes decides to isolate himself and live “aussi solitaire et retiré que dans les déserts les plus écartés...” (end of part III, p. 601).

Thus, it is not out of place to speak about the Cartesian enterprise as about a final attempt of finding in solitude and isolation what could not be found in society and conversation. In this particular context, there is no suggestion concerning an emancipatory initiative; as he started, Descartes was not in a heroic mood: on the contrary, as he confesses, he was rather discouraged by the example of many superior minds (“excellents esprits”) who seemed to have similarly failed (“me

semblaient n'y avoir pas réussi" – p.600). His retreat into solitude is thus *not the result of a heroic decision to reach autonomy*, but rather the effect of some relatively minor contingencies: the rumours which had spread (about his achievements) and which compelled him to defend his reputation by finally producing some philosophical results (p. 601).

So we don't have any hints about a particularly strong aspiration towards intellectual autonomy; what we have is disappointment with the public conversation and retreat from it, as an option for solitude (or for mental monologue); and solitude proved to be the key. For, as he himself stresses, it was while enjoying his solitude in Germany, that Descartes had the revelation (concerning the superiority of single-author works) which started his reasonings destined to lead to the new foundational method (see the beginning of the part II, especially pp. 578-579).

But the fact that the discovery of the *Cogito* has been the fruit of a (finally adopted) complete solitude should not be taken as meaning that this discovery was merely accidentally connected with isolation. The story told by Descartes is one about a *long process of separation from other minds and from the public conversation*. This process starts as soon as he discovers that "il n'y avait aucune doctrine dans le monde qui fût telle qu'on m'avait auparavant fait espérer" (p.572). It is at this early moment that he feels the need of interrupting his conversation with others: for, although aware that "la lecture de tous les bons livres este comme une conversation avec les plus honnêtes gens des siècles passés" (p.572). Consequently reading is a good source of information (as is travelling), Descartes, already disappointed by the state of human knowledge, comes to the conclusion that one should not read too much, exactly as one should not travel too much. In both cases there is a big danger, namely that of becoming a stranger in one's own country (p.573). Thus, he decides to stop reading - i.e.,

to interrupt his conversation with the wise men of the past - and to start travelling: “me résolvant de ne chercher plus d’autre science, que celle qui se pourrait trouver en moi-même, ou bien dans le grand livre du monde” (p. 577). This is his first option for isolation: *isolation from the traditional knowledge, the knowledge of the dead*, through an interruption of the conversation (i.e., through giving up reading).

At the end of his nine-year period of travel, which has proved disappointing too, we have the second option for isolation: *isolation from the public knowledge, the knowledge of his contemporaries*, through another interruption of the conversation (i.e., through giving up intellectual exchange with other people; for he had vainly hoped “en pouvoir mieux venir à bout, en conversant avec les hommes, qu’en demeurant plus longtemps renfermé dans le poêle” - p. 598). After studying “le livre du monde” (p.578), as disappointing as the books of the ancients, he now decides “d’étudier aussi en moi-même” (p. 578). This happens precisely in the moment when he is in Germany, isolated, with no conversation to distract him: “aucune conversation qui me divertît” (p. 579), and it is significant that conversation appears now as mere distracting; his hopes about it have vanished.

Thus, Descartes’ way towards his emancipatory invention of the *methodic doubt* is in fact a succession of acts by which he isolates himself from a public world (the public world of books, i.e. “la science des livres”, or the public world composed of the opinions of his contemporaries); his way is a succession of acts by which he interrupts his conversation with others.

But is one entitled to take these interruptions as steps towards solitude? One certainly is, because the identification of *conversation* with *society* was a common *topos* in the early modern thinking. This

identification was so familiar, that writers in the XVIIth century came to use the antinomy 'solitude-conversation' instead of the obvious 'solitude-society'; a defender of active life and sociability declares, for instance, in 1667: "Solitude makes us love ourselves, conversation others".<sup>13</sup>

The modern commentator of the classic text also takes 'conversation' as meaning society.<sup>14</sup> Thus, every act of abandonment of conversation meant a separation from society, and it was in this way that Descartes understood things too – that is why, after evoking his disappointment with books, scholarly debates, experience and conversations, he describes his reaction as one of distancing himself and of retiring: "m'éloigner de tous les lieux où je pouvais avoir des connaissances, et à me retirer ici..." (p. 601).

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This act of separation and retirement is correlated, of course, with the position of spectator adopted by Descartes. His option for the spectator-role is well-known, and, in recent years, more insistently placed in the center of his philosophy. For instance, starting from the remark that "der Philosoph zieht eine Grenze zwischen sich und den unberechenbaren Handlungsabläufen der Praxis", Helmar Schramm draws the conclusion that "was wir im Ergebnis vor uns haben ist ein isoliertes Individuum als Zuschauer".<sup>15</sup> This is of course true, but what seems to me to go unnoticed is the fact that Descartes' position

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<sup>13</sup> John Evelyn, *Publick Employment and an Active Life Prefer'd to Solitude, and all its Apanages*, 1667; see the reprint in Brian Vickers (ed.), *Public and Private Life in the Seventeenth Century: The Mackenzie – Evelyn Debate*, Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, Delmar, New York, 1986, p. 211.

<sup>14</sup> Vickers, *idem*, p. xxx.

<sup>15</sup> Helmar Schramm, *Karneval des Denkens*, Akademie Verlag, 1996, p. 158-159.

of 'isolated individual' is more complex than it appears in such presentations. His efforts are dedicated not only to drawing a boundary between himself and practice or active life, but also to drawing boundaries between himself and the 'science in the books', as well as between himself and the public conversation in his times. His isolation is multiple: from active life and practice, from the classical books and the received opinions, from the scholarly debates around him and even from contacts with his acquaintances. And his strategy relies precisely upon this multiple isolation, for it is by 'bracketing' all the contributions brought by these 'outer' sources (and doubting them), does Descartes manage to create his method.

Now, the main question is, of course, *to what extent his multiple isolation was determined by objective cognitive needs, and to what extent was it inspired by 'subjective' (although not necessarily exclusively personal) reactions.* Was isolation just an imperative of the time (dictated by the impulse towards individual autonomy)? Was it also a reaction to difficulties hard to cope with, such as failure to integrate and to share, failure to deal with diversity (of opinions and attitudes) and with individual incompatibilities, or with (what was perceived as) spiritual disorder?

I do not intend to suggest that Descartes was not influenced at all by the impulse towards autonomy. There are clear signs of the presence of such an impulse. To take just one example in this respect, it is quite clear that in the following passage (in which Descartes speaks about his opinions) the interest in, and the high esteem of, autonomy is strongly present:

"Et je ne me vante point aussi d'être le premier inventeur d'aucunes, mais bien, que je ne les ai jamais reçues, ni parce qu'elles avaient été dites par d'autres, ni parce qu'elles ne

l'avaient point été, mais seulement parce que la raison me les a persuadées" (p. 648).

See, in this respect, also p. 598, as well as some remarks in *La Recherche*, where Descartes emphatically rejects the idea of improving a 'picture' begun by others (p. 1118) or claims that a man

"est moins sujet à se tromper quand il agit seul et par lui-même que lorsqu'il cherche avec inquiétude à observer mille règles diverses que l'art et la paresse des hommes ont inventées plutôt pour le corrompre que pour le perfectionner" (p. 1132).

The pride of being autonomous in his convictions, a pride typical for the 'emancipatory individualism', is obvious here.

But although denying the presence of a healthy intellectual individualism in Descartes' work would be an absurdity, claiming that not individualism, but solitude, occupies the center of the stage here is not.

My last argument in this sense is based upon the fact that Descartes' attitude towards individualism and intellectual autonomy is not without ambiguities and reserves. He praises, of course, autonomy, but then he also praises cooperation, even if seldom (see, for instance, p.635). As an ideal, autonomy is certainly kept in high esteem; it is also quite clear that Descartes believed his method to be a road leading to intellectual autonomy (*La Recherche*, p. 1106). But, as to the common human possibility of reaching autonomy, he is quite skeptical, and his own success is presented as a piece of luck: "je ne mérite point plus de gloire de les avoir trouvées, que ferait un passant d'avoir rencontré par bonheur à ses pieds quelque riche trésor" (*La Recherche*, p. 1107). Although the way is paved for

a recognition of autonomy from the very beginning of the *Discours*, through the thesis that “le bon sens ou la raison est naturellement égale en tous les hommes” (*Discours*, p.568), in what follows the stronger arguments go against the practical possibility of individual autonomy: man is, of course, fallible (pp. 570, 640) and, as “plusieurs peuvent plus voir qu’un homme seul” (p. 640), it seems plausible that we are sentenced to interdependence and cooperation. Autonomy is permissible: one is allowed to demolish one’s house in order to build a new one, according to his special preferences (p. 581); but the prospects are not very encouraging, for we have all been children before becoming adults and therefore “il nous a fallu longtemps être gouvernés par nos appétits et nos précepteurs” (p. 581). As a consequence, “il este presque impossible que nos jugements soient si purs, ni si solides qu’ils auraient été, si nous avions eu l’usage entier de notre raison dès le point de notre naissance” (p. 581). In other words, it is likely that our thinking has been deeply affected and its conclusions must be reconsidered. But very few are really able to do that: and they shouldn’t even try. “La seule résolution de se défaire de toutes les opinions qu’on a reçues auparavant en sa créance n’est pas un exemple que chacun doit suivre”(p. 583). Why is that so? Simply because almost all men are either too hasty – and

“s’ils avaient une fois pris la liberté de douter des principes qu’ils ont reçus, et de s’écarter du chemin commun, jamais ils ne pourraient tenir le sentier qu’il faut prendre pour aller plus droit, et demeureraient égarés toute leur vie” (p. 583),

or too modest and obedient, and therefore “doivent bien plutôt se contenter de suivre les opinions de ces autres” (p. 583). The advantage of having received from God the same innate capacity of thinking is annihilated by the wrong use of it, characteristic to most men; or, “ce n’est pas assez d’avoir l’esprit bon, mais le principal est

de l'appliquer bien" (p. 568). Thus, the optimist idea of intellectual equality and individual richness is outweighed by the pessimist assessment of the way men use their intellects. His own success is presented by Descartes in terms which suggest that it came more or less accidentally, as a big piece of luck, than as a normal result of cognitive advancement or of the fruitfulness of human thinking.

This does not seem to be the view of a strong believer in human autonomy, for it does not place enough confidence in the intellectual resources of men, nor in their possibility of reaching independence. Descartes' optimism concerning intellectual individualism manifests itself strongly only when he speaks about his method – it is this method that constitutes the source of his confidence, expressed in formulas like "ayant rencontré un chemin qui me semble tel qu'on doit infailliblement la trouver [he refers to finding *la science* – my note, A.P.I.]" (*Discours*, p.635).

Thus, at no particular moment does an attachment for autonomy play the main role in Descartes' thinking: at the beginning of his search, his main reason is the desire to avoid error and to find certainties – he opts for independence as a means to fulfil this desire; at the end of his search, his main reason is the belief that the method just discovered is infallible – independence is just a consequence of this infallibility.

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And even in this final attitude of optimism concerning human intellectual independence there is an ambiguity. On one hand, Descartes insists that his method guarantees autonomy and can be universalized: anyone could use it in order to find truth by oneself. On the other hand, in the *Discours*, he also insists that his aim is not

to give an universal method of knowledge, but only to describe his own intellectual way:

“ainsi mon dessein n’est pas d’enseigner ici la méthode que chacun doit suivre pour bien conduire sa raison, mais seulement de faire voir en quelle sorte j’ai tâché de conduire la mienne” (p. 571).

The source of this contradiction was the antagonism between his duty to recognize his own fallibility (he could not really claim to be infallible!) and his deep conviction that the method he had discovered actually *was infallible*: the former compelled him to be modest and to avoid giving lessons to others (which he says explicitly, at the beginning of the book – see p. 571); the latter made him try to explain how anyone could reach certainty by using the methodic doubt. This tension is connected with the one between Descartes’ commitment to the ideal of single-author works and his acceptance of the principle of individual fallibility: the former made him reject cooperation with others, while the latter compelled him to accept it as useful.

His solution to these tensions was simply to live with them: he acknowledged his own fallibility and the necessity of cooperation, perhaps as concessions to the dominant idea of ‘intellectual correctness’; but he kept insisting that his method *was the infallible one* and that it was unlikely that others could continue his work. The resulting position is, of course, singular – and this singularity is another source for the solitude of Descartes.

## V. Hobbes: Political Individualism as Expression of the Natural Solitude of Man

“every man is enemy of every man [...] and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short”

Leviathan, Ch. XIII

For the medieval man, solitude meant primarily isolation from society; for the man in early modern times, solitude is above all solitude *inside society* and, more important, *due to the nature of man and of society*. The perception of society as a place in which human beings are (doomed to be) *alone* appears as the real basis of political individualism.

Montaigne thinks already that men are born ‘free and disconnected’. Pascal perceives society as a place of noise and madness, where human beings flee from themselves and from reality: public life is not the place of *encounter* or of *cooperation*, but rather a shallow artefact meant to provide *divertissement*, i.e. a means to escape from reality, and especially from facing one’s own real condition. He also recognizes *hatred* (i.e., mutual hate among individuals) as a main characteristic of human life, in a way similar to that in which Hobbes had already recognized it in social life. But what we need to understand are the reasons they both had for this new perception of human beings and their life.

It might seem that Hobbes' famous view of society is based upon rational individualism, because it starts from reasonable premises like the claim that man's life may be compared to a race, or like the lucid recognition of man's selfish ambitions, pride, and vanity. In the context suggested by such premises, the striving for power (*Leviathan*, Ch. 11) is only natural, for power is the instrument by the use of which one is able to win the race and satisfy one's ambitions; and the fact that man "cannot assure the power and the means to live well, which he hath present, without the acquisition of more" (*Ibidem*), as well as the fact that even moderate, rational, people have to seek permanently an increase of their power in order to secure their position, which are always threatened by others (who are not so moderate and so wise) – *Ibidem*, Ch. 13 - explains why the fight for power is permanent (and natural) among humans; this permanent fight for power being the source of hatred among individuals and of their solitude.

But such facts do not explain completely the war of everyone against everyone, for several reasons: a competition does not have to degenerate necessarily into a war; life is not only a competition between individuals, but also a fight of some groups against other groups as well as a collective fight against common dangers, etc. Why cannot there be fair individual competition, without hatred and war? Why wouldn't there be some sort of alliance between rational, moderate, people who seek power only as a means to defend themselves, against those who are irrational and immoderate, who invade and threaten their fellow-men? <sup>16</sup>

In other words, why doesn't Hobbes adhere to the familiar distinction between the Good and the Wicked, presenting thus social

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<sup>16</sup> See Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, University of Chicago Press, 1984, p.11, for the distinction between rational and irrational striving after power.

conflict as a conflict between kinds (groups) of people instead as one between individuals? Why doesn't he take into account the collective fight against hardships? Why wouldn't such a collective fight be more important than the conflicts between individuals? The view of society as dominated by a conflict between groups, not between individuals, would have eliminated the issue of *solitude*, leaving us only with the familiar (characteristically religious) issue of a battle between two armies, 'the forces of Light' and 'the forces of Darkness'; the view of society as a natural association, meant to counter a General Evil (dangerous to all) or a Public Enemy, such as natural catastrophes, epidemics, penury or foreign invasion, would have also eliminated solitude; finally, the right appreciation of the vulnerability of every individual (first of all as a child, an aspect of which Hobbes was not unaware of – see *De Cive*, section *Liberty*, Ch. I, # II) and then as an adult, in front of all sorts of hardships and destructive pressures, like powerlessness, illness, poverty (for, again, he realizes that "the benefits of this life may be much farthered by mutuall help" - *Ibidem*), could have led Hobbes to see society as a natural and also as a necessary kind of association, not as an artefact.

If none of these happened, it is for several reasons, some of which are very remarkable. First of all, Hobbes seems to perceive the general dangers coming from non-individual sources (such as foreign military invasion, destructive natural forces, maladies, hardships, penury), and threatening the whole community, as being much less important than those coming from one individual or from a small group of compatriots, and threatening another individual or small group; consequently, he underestimates fear of dangers coming from non-individual sources and affecting equally all the members of a community, while overestimating "the mutuall fear they had of each other" (*Ibidem*). It is this perception of the human condition, this picture of the individual as being threatened first of all and mainly by

other individuals, that constitutes Hobbes' first premise of the interpretation of human life as 'solitary and poor', and as a war "of all men against all men" (*De Cive*, section *Dominion*, Ch. V, # II).

Hobbes is of course aware that human beings are bound to fight permanently against impersonal evils, and that we all make war, continuously, against all sorts of difficulties and obstacles, natural or social; but this kind of 'general' war (which is better won by mutual help) does not interest him very much. *What we can fight together against is not very important for him; what appears as really important is the personal war of every one against every one else.* The relevance of the latter is amplified to the extent that not much space is left for something else. We can thus already notice that it is *the essential solitude* of man, presupposed by this way of assessing dangers, that pushes him towards the famous conclusions symbolized by *homo homini lupus*; not the 'rational individualism', but the tacit supposition that incompatibilities and hostility among men are more important than their need for mutual help, the feeling that their collective interests are less urgent than their individual ones, and consequently that their main problems are the *individual* ones (characteristic for people going *lonely ways*) are the elements that give a *prima facie* credibility to these conclusions. But although Hobbes underestimated collective dangers, it is certain that he did not ignore them, as he did not ignore the alternative of a *collective search for protection* against common dangers.

If all these do not come to play a more significant role in his conception, it is because he simply didn't believe that joining forces could have helped men to protect themselves and win the battle against the Wicked. In Chapter XVII, *Of the Causes, Generation, and Definition of a Commonwealth*, in the second part of the *Leviathan*, Hobbes presents several reasons for his skepticism in this respect.

The first one is that joining forces can be an insufficient measure, when the 'enemy' is very strong. For "the multitude sufficient to confide in for our security is not determined by any certain number, but by comparison with the enemy we fear" (Ibidem). Now, this is not a very convincing argument, for it is both too weak and too strong. Too weak, since it does not account for cases in which the enemy is not so strong as to make association useless. Too strong, since it can be used against any protective measures: not only association, but any other defensive measure can be in vain, if the enemy is so overwhelmingly strong. We can thus safely leave aside this first reason for skepticism towards association, as being more or less irrelevant.

The second reason is much more significant. Suppose that many individuals have joined forces, in order to protect themselves,

"yet if their actions be directed according to their particular judgements, and particular appetites, they can expect thereby no defence, nor protection, neither against a common enemy, nor against the injuries of one another. For being distracted in their opinions concerning the best use and application of their strength, they do not help, but hinder one another, and reduce their strength by mutual opposition to nothing: whereby they are easily, not only subdued by a very few that agree together, but also, when there is no common enemy, they make war upon each other for their particular interests" (Ibidem).

Here we have a main argument against social unity and cooperation. Hobbes presents *diversity* (of opinions and interests) as the main obstacle to collective action: individuals appear as being so different and so inclined to fight each other for their particular interests that no association can be successful. There are problems with this argument too: if people are so markedly different and have so strongly

opposing interests, why would there be a danger from “a very few that agree together”? How could they agree, after all? It’s only the Good who are disunited, while the Wicked are more cooperative? One can only guess.

But the fact is that Hobbes’ view remains deeply pessimistic. Even if men join forces during the fight against a common enemy, they regularly turn against each other, as soon as the enemy has been defeated (Ibidem). The main conclusion to be drawn is that men are incurably uncooperative, and this follows from the very human nature. There are five features of man, that distinguish him from ‘social animals’ like bees and ants, and that prevent cooperation: the permanent competition between men, “for honour and dignity”, a competition that generates “envy, and hatred, and finally war”; the difference that exists between the common good and the private good, a difference that makes humans unable to enjoy anything else than one’s superiority over others: for “man, whose joy consisteth in comparing himself with other men, can relish nothing but what is eminent” (Ibidem); the ambition to govern, “reform and innovate”, combined with the diversity of opinions on what should be done; the very capacity of speech, which is used by men to exaggerate and to abuse, thus creating discontent and trouble; the human capacity to offend; and finally, the artificial character of human agreement, which can only be maintained by force (by “a common power to keep them in awe and to direct their actions to the common benefit” - Ibidem).

In Chapter XIII, *Of the Natural Condition of Mankind as concerning their Felicity or Misery*, Hobbes insists upon only three reasons that make man, as a natural being, averse to social intercourse. The first is, again, competition seen as a null-sum game: for, “if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies” and “endeavour to destroy and subdue each other” (Ibidem). This is the main source of fear or “diffidence of

one another". The second reason is that even one's mere security requires permanent increase of one's power, which, of course, offends others; this necessity arises

"because there be some that, taking pleasure in contemplating their own power in the acts of conquest, which they pursue farther than their security requires, if others, that otherwise would be glad to be at ease within modest bounds, should not by invasion increase their power, they would not be able, long time, by standing only on their defence, to subsist" (Ibidem).

The third reason is that "men have no pleasure (but on the contrary a great deal of grief) in keeping company where there is no power able to overawe them all". This inability to enjoy company is due to pride, vanity or, as Hobbes himself puts it, 'glory'. Strauss explains this predicament as follows:

"if man's natural appetite is vanity, this means that man by nature strives to surpass all his fellows and to have his superiority recognized by others, in order that he may take pleasure in himself; that he naturally wishes the whole world to fear and obey him".<sup>17</sup>

Now, it is true that in this picture of individual isolation and mutual enmity there are suggestions which might create the feeling that autonomy and independence were important aims for Hobbes. Indeed, the end of attaining self-reliance is quite obvious. But the tendency towards self-reliance does not appear as an emancipatory initiative: it should be seen more as a reaction to "that miserable condition of war which is necessarily consequent, as hath been shown,

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<sup>17</sup> Strauss, *Ibidem*, p. 18.

to the natural passions of men where there is no visible power to keep them in awe" (*Leviathan*, Chapter XVII). Admittedly, some human beings are rational and modest enough, so that they want power only as a means for conservation, security and independence. But, as Strauss insists, this is not a characteristic of human nature:

"Only the irrational striving after power, which is found more frequently than the rational striving, is to be taken as natural human appetite. For the rational striving after power rests on already rational reflection and is for that very reason not natural".<sup>18</sup>

Thus, the natural tendency towards power (and independence) is not rational and emancipatory; it is rather irrational and oppressive. The rational aspiration to security and autonomy is a latecomer. The correct image of things is therefore the following: the natural passions of men (pride, vanity, selfishness) push them to mutual enmity (as Strauss puts it, "every man is for that very reason the enemy of every other man, because each desires to surpass every other and thereby offends every other" – *Ibidem*, p. 12); mutual enmity generates mutual fear; then, both enmity and fear create a state of permanent war between humans (for 'war' does not designate only actual battles, but also the state in which threats and dispositions to fight are present: "the nature of war consisteth not in actual fighting, but in the known disposition thereto during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary" – *Leviathan*, Chapter XIII); next, the state of war, "where every man is enemy to every man" (*Ibidem*), creates that "miserable situation", described in the same chapter, which makes "the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" (*Ibidem*). And it is only as a reaction to that situation that men aspire to peace, restraint and

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<sup>18</sup> Strauss, *Ibidem*, p. 10.

mutual tolerance (i.e., every one must “be contented with so much liberty against other men as he would allow other men against himself” – *Ibidem*).

It should be remarked that, despite their focus on individual conduct, the original pride, vanity and selfishness of men cannot be identified with the emancipatory individualism that modernity claims to rely upon. This kind of enlightened individualism is self-assertive, but it aims at autonomy and self-sufficiency, at independence, not at oppression; while the natural selfishness and pride of men, although they are perhaps conducive to self-assertion too, are *offensive* and *oppressive*. The former is inspired by a legitimate (and rational) need of fulfilment and freedom, being in the end nothing else than an attempt to unchain individuality – to create a zone of individual autonomy; on the contrary, the latter are determined by passions and appetites which, in the end, are not rational at all, and which push one (not simply to assert oneself, but) *to expand one’s own territory at the expense of others*. Thus, abusive and oppressive selfishness is a basic fact about men, in Hobbes’ view, while legitimate individualism is not.

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“this naturall proclivity of men, to hurt each other, which they derive from their Passions, but chiefly from a vain Esteem of themselves...”

*De Cive, Liberty, Ch. I*

Hobbes insists so much and so openly upon the anti-social character of men, that any argumentation for the idea of *the essential and originary human solitude* runs the risk of sounding trivial. Indeed,

the point made here becomes almost self-evident, especially if one takes into account not only the *Leviathan*, but also *De Cive*. In the very first chapter - *Liberty*, # II - we encounter an avalanche of arguments in this respect; in order to reject the traditional idea "that Man is a Creature born fit for society", Hobbes mobilizes a lot of (what he certainly takes as) decisive facts: society is not an aim in itself, but rather an instrument that men use – for "We do not therefore by nature seek Society for its own sake, but that we may receive some Honour and Profit from it"; men do not really enjoy company – they use it only as a place where their vanity can be satisfied: "they are not so much delighted in with the Society, as their own Vain glory". Despite the fact that "the benefits of this life may be much farthered by mutuall help", and although "to Man [...] Solitude is an Enemy", because "Infants have need of others to help them to live, and those of riper years to help them to live well", men are not 'born fit' for society: as children, they cannot appreciate the advantages brought by association – "because they know not what Society is, cannot enter into it; these, because ignorant of the benefit it brings, care not for it".

Thus, the amazingly simple conclusion: "all Men, because they are born in Infancy, are born unapt for society". But many of them remain 'unapt for society' all the time, because of their defects: "Many also (perhaps most men) either through defect of minde, or want of education remain unfit during the whole course of their lives". The fact that men desire society (in many cases, only in order to be able to manifest their pride inside it) does not prove that they are social beings: "for it is one thing to desire, another to be in the capacity fit for what we desire". And it is first of all pride that makes us 'unfit for society', for it determines us to reject equality and to seek only our own 'Glory', at the expense of others. Another argument is that men are dominated by hatred, not by love for their fellow-humans: "they

not only love not their fellowes, but even persecute them with hatred". But it is not only hate that separates them from each other; it's also "the mutuall fear they had of each other". Hobbes thinks that a simple look at the usual human behaviour provides a lot of proofs for the omnipresence of fear:

"They who go to Sleep, shut their Doores; they who Travell carry their Swords with them, because they fear Thieves. Kingdomes guard their Coasts and Frontiers with Forts, and Castles; Cities are compast Townes" (Ibidem).

In the *Leviathan*, the description becomes even more explicit, taking into account not only the usual attitudes of men towards strangers, but also their attitudes towards relatives:

"when taking a journey, he arms himself and seeks to go well accompanied; when going to sleep, he locks his doors; when even in his house he locks his chests; and this when he knows there be laws and public officers, armed, to revenge all injuries shall be done him; what opinion he has of his fellow subjects, when he rides armed; of his fellow citizens, when he locks his doors; and of his children, and servants, when he locks his chests. Does he not there as much accuse mankind by his actions as I do by my words?" (*Leviathan*, Chapter XIII).

Fear and distrust, the inclination to see all the others *as possibly dangerous strangers*, and, consequently, the feeling of solitude, are thus universal. Nor does an elimination of fear change things: in its absence, the natural tendency would not be that of seeking company, but rather that of seeking domination upon others: "men would much more greedily be carried by Nature, if all fear were removed, to obtain Dominion, than to gain Society". To these, it should be added also

mutual contempt: “men must declare sometimes some mutuall scorn and contempt either by Laughter, or by Words, or by Gesture, or some other sign” (Ibidem, # V). And the result of all these feelings they have for each other, and especially of rivalry (for “the most frequent reason why men desire to hurt each other, ariseth hence, that many men at the same time have an Appetite to the same thing” - Ibidem, # VI), is that all men have a natural desire *to hurt*: “All men in the State of Nature have a desire, and will to hurt” (Ibidem, # IV).

Society cannot thus be a ‘natural’ association of men; its ‘bonds’ are based on ‘Compacts’, being therefore artificial (Ibidem, # II); and they are established for selfish reasons: “All Society, therefore, is either for Gain or for Glory; i.e., not so much for love of our Fellowes, as for love of our Selves” (Ibidem).

But what this purely instrumental character of society indicates is, in the end, its contingency. Recognizing that society is just an instrument by which men try to fulfil their interests amounts to recognizing that social intercourse, although sometimes useful (and some other times harmful!), is not necessary – it’s more or less accidental. Hobbes was perfectly aware of this consequence of his interpretation:

“for they who shall more narrowly look into the Causes for which Men come together, and delight in each others company, shall easily find that this happens not because naturally it could happen no otherwise, but by Accident” (Ibidem).

Although “it may seem strange to some man that has not well weighed these things that Nature should thus dissociate and render men apt to invade and destroy one another” (*Leviathan*, Chapter XIII), this is the plain truth: naturally, man is a solitary being. In the beginning, so to say, it was the Solitude, not the Society.

Now, it goes, for us, without saying that this view of human nature and of society was, to no small extent, pure fiction: even if we leave aside the question concerning the possible historic reality of the 'natural state', we are dissatisfied with the simplifications operated by Hobbes. Not only that the idea of an universal, all-comprehensive, hatred and of a general war of everyone against everyone was a gross exaggeration (even in the cases Hobbes specifically refers to); not only that the diversity and the incompatibilities haunting human beings were unnecessarily amplified, while common elements and compatibilities were underrated; but also the links between individuals were mistakenly identified with a particular kind of connections (based upon agreement). Authors like Richard Hooker were of course right in insisting, as he did in his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1594), that society was based not only on "an order expressly or secretly agreed upon", but also on "a natural inclination whereby all men desire sociable life and fellowship". This inclination could have been easily explained by analogy with other living beings; but Hobbes chose to amplify and dramatize the difference between men and 'sociable animals', precisely in order to stress the role of contracts in human life. The way in which he exacerbates enmity and solitude in society might also be seen as an useful counterweight to the opposite exaggerations. The dominant conceptions (mostly theologically inspired, for even inside Protestantism there was a clear stress upon the idea that "God has created mankind for fellowship, and not for solitariness" – as Martin Luther had put it) presented man as "made for society" (by God), and social life as dominated by common interests, mutual support, and cooperation. Given the numerous views which insisted upon *content* - such as Hooker's: "Civil society doth more content the nature of man than any private kind of solitary living" (*Ibidem*) -, Hobbes' insistence upon the discontents among individuals (and the resulting individual solitude) came as a useful reminder.

But it is essential to remember that Hobbes does not deny, in the end, the usefulness of social intercourse; he only interprets it differently. The benefits of public life cannot be simply derived from a deeply-engrained human need of companionship and partnership; they must be seen as results of a process of 'social learning': it is because men experience enmity, hatred or war, and thereby solitude, that they can learn about their 'miserable condition' as natural beings. This does not mean, of course, that at a certain moment of time the whole mankind had experienced *bellum omnium contra omnes*; "I believe it was never generally so, over all the world" says Hobbes in the *Leviathan* (Ch. XIII). But, "though there had never been any time wherein particular men were in a condition of war one against another", this experience of general war is accessible in some particular cases: it is characteristic to America (says Hobbes) and to the international stage (*Ibidem*). Concentrating upon it, one can understand what the natural condition of man really is. The fact that not all communities and not all individuals have actually experienced the natural state is not important: the natural state has nevertheless a certain reality, being *the state in which men would have lived if they did not agree to create the civil society*. Analogously, the fact that present individuals do not live alone, and do not, perhaps, experience the essential, original, solitude, is irrelevant: *solitude has nevertheless its own reality, constituting the core of the natural state*.

Thus, what we take more or less as a theoretical fiction was, for Hobbes, no such thing. Solitude (as well as hatred or war) was a basic fact for him, exactly as it was a basic, definitory, one for Montaigne and Pascal, or an ideal for Descartes. This is, of course, a very remarkable event: that several founders of modern thinking, working in general independently from each other, agreed upon the basic solitude of human beings cannot be a mere coincidence; it is something that stands in need for explanation.

As to Hobbes, the contemporary commentators, and among them first of all Quentin Skinner, tend to clarify things by connecting his views to the dramatic social conflicts of the time. But, even if this explanation works in the case of Hobbes, it cannot be generalized, for other thinkers have been influenced less, if at all, by the experience of the civil or religious wars (least of all, probably, Descartes). We are thus compelled to look for a more general interpretation of this unexpected and spectacular emergence of solitude in the center of the stage, at the beginnings of modernity.

## VI. Sources of Solitude

“ein unendliches Bedürfnis  
einsam zu sein”

GOETHE, Letter to Charlotte v. Stein

If one claims that it was the exacerbation of solitude, and not the eruption of an emancipatory individualism, that triggered those deep moral, cognitive and political re-orientations which are so typical for modernity, and also so visible in the works of Montaigne, Descartes and Hobbes, then one faces the task of explaining this apparently sudden amplification of the feeling of solitude. What brought solitude in the forefront, so forcefully and so convincingly, for various thinkers?

I cannot, of course, provide a general answer to this question, but I would like to show that there are some important hints, in their works, as regarding this phenomenon. There must have been, of course, some preconditions for this sudden revelation: among them, for sure, the abandonment of the traditional metaphysical interpretations of human nature and human life, that opened the way for new and unorthodox ones; and, on a different plane, the experience of conflict and controversy, in various fields: social, religious or intellectual, which certainly destroyed many illusions about human nature, human conduct and human sociability. But I shall leave aside these (quite obvious) elements of context. Instead, I shall make a few suggestions about some ‘shocks’, the traces of which can be found in the works I have drawn upon, and which seem to have had a great influence on (what could perhaps be called) ‘the

birth of modern solitude'. It is as if the modern mind, under the impact of these 'shocks', suddenly realised its essential loneliness; and this revelation shaped the theories elaborated by many different leading figures of the early modern period.

The increasing irrelevance of the traditional, 'grand', metaphysical and religious views of man and social life led to a change of perspective: if such ample and speculative views do not inspire modern thinking any more, then inspiration must come from other source, and one of the few available is history. But history presents the human stage as a place of 'sound and fury', of selfishness, ruthlessness and hatred – so that adopting the historical perspective means recognising the central place of Evil in human affairs and, in the end, its 'naturalness': if wickedness is omnipresent in human history, then it must be somehow 'natural' for men. With thinkers like Machiavelli, it is already clear that *naturalism* has conquered the modern mind: selfishness, lust for power, ruthlessness are now seen as more or less *natural*, as ingrained in human nature. But naturalism is an ample and complex view of human affairs, and also diffuse, to some extent; it is hard to see 'the discovery of naturalism' as a 'shock'. A real shock must be better circumscribed and localised, and, if one has a closer look at the texts, one can notice the traces of some well-determined but explosive 'discoveries' which preoccupied the minds at the beginning of the modern age.

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"au fond ce n'est que haine"  
PASCAL, *Pensées*, # 134

One of these 'discoveries' seems to have been the one concerning *the basic incompatibilities between men*. When Machiavelli makes

his famous remark, in *Il Principe*, that a man forgets more easily the killing of his closest relatives than the confiscation of his property, we already have here a tacit recognition of the supremacy of personal interests over any other attachments. In such a world, dominated by immediate, private interests, how could the attachment to the 'common good' be important any more?

In his essay *Of Faction*, Francis Bacon presents human groups as characterised by a permanent tendency towards *division*; there always are factions that fight each other and "when one of the factions is extinguished, the remaining subdivideth".<sup>19</sup> But the really important thing is that the tendency towards division and conflict is not active only between political groups – Bacon stresses that "the same holdeth in private factions" (*Ibidem*). The feeling one has, when reading such remarks, is that any group of men is bound to permanently fight an enemy, so that, when one enemy disappears, the members of the group (the former 'allies') turn against each other.

Indeed, this is exactly what Hobbes would soon say explicitly: "when there is no common enemy, they make war upon each other for their particular interests" (*Leviathan*, Part II: *Of Commonwealth*, Ch. 17).

Montaigne goes farther than Bacon, because, as indicated above, he already has a theory about the fatal incompatibility between all things (any particular thing comes into existence and survives through the 'corruption' of another); and he explains the incompatibilities between men by evoking the inevitable opposition of interests: "Le profit de l'un est dommage de l'autre".

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<sup>19</sup> Francis Bacon, *Essays*, Dent & Sons, 1978, p. 152.

Even more complex, and better founded philosophically, is Hobbes' theory about human incompatibilities. Men are driven either by hope or by fear ("the actions of men proceed from the will, and the will from hope and fear"- *De Cive, Dominion, Ch. V, # 1*); fear, obviously, separates men from each other, but the interesting (and quite unexpected) thing is that hope separates them too: for

"The hope therefore which each man hath of his security, and self-preservation, consists in this, that by force or craft he may disappoint his neighbour, either openly or by stratagem" (Ibidem)

Man is thus naturally inclined to act against others, an idea that is also supported by Hobbes' conviction that, for men, the common good differs from the private good. Both in the *Leviathan* (Ibidem) and in *De Cive (Dominion, Ch. V, # V)*, when pointing out the difference between men and 'social animals', he takes as granted that men's private interests are different from their common interest. A fundamental incompatibility between humans follows inevitably from this premise, of course. And this incompatibility is *natural*; as Hobbes insists, it is nature that *dissociates* us (*Leviathan, Part I, Ch. 13*).

But then, if there is such a natural incompatibility that dominates the relationships between individuals, and if, as Montaigne says, "nos souhaits interieurs pour la plus part naissent et se nourrissent aux despens d'autrui" (I, 22, 106), what else than *hatred* (among individuals) could follow?

Thus, the first 'shock' that influenced modern mind might well have been *the shock of hatred*, i.e. the shock provoked by the discovery that men permanently hate, and are bound to hate, each other. And it is not inappropriate to speak about a shock here, because the change from a doctrine of *love* (central to Christianity: "*Thou*

*shalt not hate thy brother*" – *Leviticus*, XIX, 17) to a naturalist view focussing on *hate* could not be without dramatism.

The depth of what could be called 'the shock of hatred' can be measured by the variety of views that were preoccupied, or even obsessed, with the presence of hate among humans. It is, of course, no surprise to see that thinkers with a 'realistic' view, like Hobbes, are convinced that men "not only love not their fellowes, but even persecute them with hatred" (*De Cive, Liberty*, Ch. 1, # II). This is just an obvious consequence of the peculiarities of human nature, one which – according to such views - differentiates men from animals: "hatred and envy, out of which arise sedition and warre, is among men, among beasts no such matter" (*De Cive, Dominion*, Ch. V, # V).

Similar opinions coming from sceptics like Montaigne should not be unexpected either. But what about deeply religious thinkers, like Pascal, who thematise hate no less insistently? Pascal starts from the premise that "la nature de l'amour-propre et de ce *moi* humain est de n'aimer que soi et de ne considérer que soi".<sup>20</sup> His conclusion, then, is amazingly similar to the one drawn by Hobbes: "chaque *moi* est l'ennemi et voudrait être le tyran de tous les autres" (Ibidem, # 136). The fact that every self is "injuste en soi" (Ibidem) transforms human relationships in a hell of sorts, for men try to hide their real sentiments and attitudes, so that "l'union qui est entre les hommes n'est fondée que sur cette mutuelle tromperie" (# 130). Not only that Pascal, as a good Christian, declares the self to be 'hateful', in his famous "le *moi* est haïssable" (# 136); but he also acknowledges that "Tous les hommes se haïssent naturellement l'un l'autre" (# 134).

The topic of universal hate becomes a familiar one, and in the next century we easily find remarks like:

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<sup>20</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, Gallimard, 1954, # 130.

“Je n’ai guère vu de ville qui ne désirât la ruine de la ville voisine, point de famille qui ne voulût exterminer quelque autre famille” (Voltaire, *Candide*, Ch. 20) or “Men hate more steadily than they love” (Samuel Johnson, *Boswell’s Life*).

But from such a discovery like “au fond ce n’est que haine” (Pascal), nothing could follow than a deep feeling of solitude. Hatred separates men: “In so far as men are tormented by anger, envy, or any passion implying hatred, they are drawn asunder...” (Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Part II). The omnipresence of hate also implied the necessity that everyone should turn towards oneself, and should protect oneself from others (i.e., from one’s ‘haters’). The religious thinkers, who associated solitude with selfishness, sin and therefore with the Devil (“Every man for himself, his own ends, the Devil for all”, wrote Richard Burton in his famous *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Part III, # 1) were very critical of this tendency; but, despite their warnings - “A man is never alone [...] he is with the Devil, who ever consorts with our solitude” (Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*, Part II) - the adequacy of separation, if not isolation, in a world of ‘haters’, was hard to deny. After all, ‘haters’ are obviously a bad company, and as Pierre Gringoire had already remarked at the beginning of the XVIth century (even before Montaigne), “Mieux vaut être seul que mal accompagné”.

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“Far from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife...”  
THOMAS GRAY, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*

Perhaps not completely unrelated to the discovery of hatred was *the shock of estrangement*. There are enormously many signs that, starting with the XVth century, a new feeling spreads itself around:

the feeling that *all the others (including the closest relatives) are strangers*. Sometimes, this sentiment appears connected with a desire of self-fulfilment and efficiency (i.e. with emancipatory individualism), like in the famous claim of Bacon: “He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune; for they are impediments to great enterprises, either of virtue or mischief” (*Of Marriage and Single Life*, *Ibidem*, p. 22). We now see the rise of the idea that ‘great man are and should be solitary’; association is reserved for ordinary people, while solitude is the mark of personalities: “Mean men, in their rising, must adhere; but great men, that have strength in themselves, were better to maintain themselves indifferent and neutral” (*Of Faction*, *Ibidem*, p. 152). Or, as John Webster says a bit later (1614): “Eagles commonly fly alone; they are crows, daws and starlings that flock together” (*The Duchess of Malfi*).

But this does not seem to be the most frequent case. What is startling is *a new perception* of others as *distant figures*, of no much interest for one – and this perception is not necessarily connected with individualism. Bacon himself expresses this new feeling, when saying in *Of Friendship*:

“a crowd is not company, and faces are but a gallery of pictures, and talk but a tinkling cymbal, where there is no love” (*Ibidem*, p. 80).

What is denounced here is, of course, company without real love, which might seem as mere contingency, irrelevant to the topic of modern solitude; but once it is acknowledged that “Tous les hommes se haïssent naturellement l’un l’autre” (Pascal) and everyone is a ‘hater’, rather than anything else, then the consequence of this general absence of love must necessarily be that, for everyone, all the others become “but a gallery of pictures”, that is mere ‘strangers’.

The feeling that others are (unimportant) strangers is particularly evident in Montaigne's essays. Not only that one's contemporaries must be kept at a distance and their company avoided, because they bring more trouble than happiness; but even one's family is irrelevant – it is just an ornament to one's life, and must be treated as such. That is the justification for the appeal to retreat into one's own *arrière boutique*.

That others are 'strangers' follows also from Hobbes' view of men as 'natural enemies'. We never meet for the pleasure of companionship, Hobbes suggests in *De Cive* (*Liberty*, Ch. I, # II); we only meet in order to manifest our own vanity, to criticise and condemn others, to "wound the absent" (*Ibidem*). Estrangement is deducible from our incapacity to stay together, too. The closer men are, the greatest the hate, and therefore the greatest the estrangement between them; for instance, no wars are so ruthless as those between men from the same group: "there are no Warres so sharply wag'd as between Sects of the same Religion, and Factions of the same Commonwealth" (*Ibidem*, # V).

And this brings us to a very important aspect of human estrangement. Many remarks by authors in the early modern age suggest the idea that *closeness now appears as unbearable*: it is as if men simply could not stand too much closeness any more – as if they were incommoded by others, exasperated with the presence of others. In the XVIth century, different versions of the idea "Better your room than your company" (Simon Forman, *Marriage of Wit and Wisdom*, 1570) abound. As indicated above, Montaigne seems to have been obsessed with the inconveniences created by all the others (including his own family): others inconvenience, create unnecessary difficulties, bring little comfort and torture with their problems. Pascal remarks that the self "est incommode aux autres" (# 136), and, of course,

others are incommode to the self too. Exasperation is the previsible consequence of this mutual torture between the Self and the Other.

Writing about characteristic modifications in private habits, at the beginning of modernity, J.L. Flandrin is so impressed with the obvious tendencies towards isolation ('as if one wanted to place oneself in an immaterial box'), that he asks himself whether what really was at stake was the (much praised) aspiration towards privacy, or some sort of horror of others.<sup>21</sup> That is a very good question, I think. Indeed, much of what Montaigne, Pascal, Hobbes and other 'founding fathers' say creates the feeling that some sort of *horror of others* manifested itself in the thoughts and reactions characteristic for the early modern period. This horror of others could explain the permanent praise of solitude, which is sometimes seen as sacred ("O sacred solitude, divine retreat" – Edward Young, *Love of Fame*), recommended as being "choice of the prudent" (Ibidem) and highly-esteemed from Montaigne and Pascal to the Romantics.

Of course, there have always been also complaints about solitude, visible in such pathetic pictures like the following (also given by a Romantic author):

"Oben zogen große Weltkugeln; auf jeder wohnte ein einziger Mensch, er streckte bittend die Arme nach einem andern aus, der auch auf einer stand und hinüberblickte; aber die Kugeln liefen mit den Einsiedlern um die Sonnensichel, und die Gebete waren umsonst. - Auch ich sehnte mich." (Jean Paul, *Titan*, 99.Zykel).

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<sup>21</sup> See Flandrin's article in the volume edited by P. Ariès, G. Duby: *The History of Private Life*. I have used the Romanian translation of this volume: *Istoria vieții private*, Ed. Meridiane, 1995, vol.5, p.326-327.

But not only that such complaints about isolation and the impossibility to join others are outweighed by the huge number of beautifying characterisations of solitude; not only that the modern mind seems to enjoy the isolation on its own 'planet' or 'island' – more important is the feeling that the Other's presence is bound to constitute an obstacle to the Self:

„Ich ging letzthin in der Nacht durch die Königstraße. Ein Mann kam mir entgegen mit einer Lanterne. Sich selbst leuchtete er auf den Weg, mir aber machte er es noch dunkler. – Mit welcher Eigenschaft des Menschen hat diese Blendlanterne Ähnlichkeit?“.<sup>22</sup>

On one hand, the romantic Self feels unable to cope with the demands that Others make upon him: „Ich bin nicht, was die Menschen von mir halten, mich drücken ihre Erwartungen“.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, despite one's nostalgia for others, there is sometimes a confession about the *pure dislike* which separates the Self from any other being: „ich passe nicht unter die Menschen, es ist eine traurige Wahrheit, aber eine Wahrheit; und wenn ich den Grund ohne Umschweif angeben soll, so ist es dieser: sie gefallen mir nicht“.<sup>24</sup> In any case, the result is a feeling of estrangement from others, even from one's closest friends: „Was ich fühle, wie sprech ich es aus?/ - Der Mensch ist doch immer,/ Selbst auch in dem Kreis lieblicher Freunde, allein“.<sup>25</sup>

Exasperation with the presence of others can be detected also in other fields than philosophy or poetry. Writing about the XVIIIth

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<sup>22</sup> Heinrich von Kleist, a letter to Wilhelmine von Zunge, 18.11.1800, in *Werke in zwei Bänden*, Carl Hanser Verlag, 1977, Band II, p. 594.

<sup>23</sup> H. von Kleist, letter to Ulrike von Kleist, 12.01.1802, *Ibidem*, p. 712.

<sup>24</sup> H. von Kleist, letter to Ulrike von Kleist, 05.02.1801, *Ibidem*, p. 628.

<sup>25</sup> H. von Kleist, *Die Bestimmung*, *Ibidem*, Erster Band, p. 25.

century debate on population, a contemporary author remarks that Malthus' fears about an exaggerate increase of population in modern times were not justified by facts – rather, they were an expression of a characteristic feeling that the world was 'overcrowded':

“Thus, when Malthus, in his *On the Principle of Population* of 1798, predicted that population could well increase faster than food supplies, he was considerably revaluating a topic that had long been invested with a sense of crisis. This perspective appeared compelling, however, not because there were in 1798 too many people in the world – not even Malthus claimed that the world was overpopulated at the time he wrote. Rather, as I will argue, Malthus' *Essay*, instead of being a response to the pressure of too many bodies, registers the felt pressure of too many consciousness, and his fear of overpopulation represents what might be called a Romantic political economy, much as the sense of psychic crowding in Wordsworth's descriptions of London in book 7 of *The Prelude* represents a Romantic poetic consciousness”.<sup>26</sup>

The idea of 'psychic crowding' seems important to me, although, of course, it badly needs clarification. But if a certain concept of 'psychic crowding' proves useful, then its history should start with Montaigne, I think, for in his essays we already feel that kind of exasperation, with others and with their (too extended) presence, which gives content to this concept. It's Montaigne who first said - so it seems, at least - that he could not stand the crowd (be it the crowd at *Le Louvre*, or in the streets), and thus initiated a tradition of retreat from the multitude.

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<sup>26</sup> Frances Ferguson *Solitude and the Sublime*, Routledge, 1992, p.114.

The growing sense of crowding, at the beginning of modernity, is also confirmed by the frequent occurrence of the motive of *hydra*. Shakespeare repeatedly compares the multitude to a 'monster with uncounted heads' (*Henry IV*; see also *Coriolanus*); Erasmus describes the crowd as "a beast of many heads", and Thomas Browne refers to "that great enemy of reason, virtue, and religion, the Multitude, that numerous piece of monstrosity, more prodigious than Hydra" (*Religio Medici*, part II, # 1). The horror of multitude, although more easily justifiable than the mere *horror of others*, is not unconnected to the latter: both express an annihilation of the *sense of belonging*, which appears as atrophied, and a negative reaction towards *sharing and joining*, and both push one towards solitude.

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"A wise man is never less alone than when he is alone"  
SWIFT, Essays

The revelation of the immense incompatibility that exists between humans took also some other, less dramatic, forms. These were connected with another discovery: the discovery (or invention) of subjectivity. As Norbert Elias insisted, both in *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation* and in his *Gesellschaft der Individuen*, by identifying himself with his own subjectivity (thinking, feeling, moral traits), modern man decided that his very being was located 'somewhere inside', in an inner, private space, while all the other men ('the strangers') were 'outside' and, of course, completely unable to step in; a new picture emerges:

"Die Vorstellung des einzelnen Menschen, daß er ein *homo clausus* ist, eine kleine Welt für sich, die letzten Endes ganz unabhängig von der großen Welt außerhalb seiner existiert [...]"

Jeder andere Mensch erscheint ebenfalls als ein *homo clausus*; sein Kern, sein Wesen, sein eigentliches Selbst erscheint ebenfalls als etwas, das in seinem Innern durch eine unsichtbare Mauer, von allem was draußen ist, auch von allen andern Menschen, abgeschollen ist".<sup>27</sup>

Representing individuality as 'closed', as a citadel ('the citadel of self'), in which one's 'true' essence - the whole complex of one's thoughts, one's inner life, one's defining features - is 'hidden' (being inaccessible to others) was, of course, a way of suggesting that men are essentially isolated beings, who cannot really communicate. It has become a commonplace to illustrate this new view of subjectivity and human nature by evoking Leibniz' famous *monads*, and Norbert Elias insistently compares selves (as seen by early modern thinkers) to monads. The problem is more complicated, though, than it might appear: it is true that Leibniz himself compared his monads with 'souls', presenting them as 'soul-like' entities, but it is not clear at all to what extent his heavily metaphysical and speculative view can be considered connected with, or inspired by, the new, modern, way of interpreting human individuality as subjectivity and inwardness. Nevertheless, its relevance can hardly be denied: the picture of a multitude of monads, which do not communicate with each other, because, as Leibniz says, 'they have no windows', is very appealing for anyone who tries to describe the early modern view of the self, for souls are themselves essentially 'windowless'. Indeed, selves (as 'inner citadels', or as 'inner depths', hidden to others) cannot really communicate with each other, exactly like monads; the cosmic solitude suggested by Leibniz' metaphysics, in the *Monadology*, is analogous to the solitude which selves are bound to experience, as long as their most intimate components (belonging to the soul) are

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<sup>27</sup> Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation*, Suhrkamp, 1981, Band I, *Einleitung*, p. 11.

mutually inaccessible. And the analogy goes even further. Leibniz insisted on the *richness* of every monad, which mirrors, and, in a sense, contains in itself, the whole universe. This suggests that isolated individuals, exactly like monads, are equally rich and contain in themselves a whole world. The suggestion is confirmed by the frequency with which early modern thinkers assert the richness of any individual. Montaigne's idea that "nous sommes chacun plus riche que nous ne pensons" (III, 12, 1015) becomes a typical premise, and its consequence is the assertion that a man is never truly alone, because he is always accompanied by his 'inner richness': thoughts, feelings etc. Hence, the multitude of XVIIth century declarations like "They are never alone that are accompanied with noble thoughts" (Philip Sidney, *Arcadia*). Inner richness thus becomes a usual justification for self-sufficiency and isolation. The Romantic idea that a man is a world in (and for) itself has its antecedents in the early modern period.

But the discovery of subjectivity and the image of *homo clausus* implied not only emancipatory conclusions about self-sufficiency, but also less encouraging remarks about incommunicability. Every man is a whole world, but, like monads, these individual worlds have no 'windows': they are inaccessible to each other. And it is obvious that incommunicability, or at least the huge difficulties of communication, intensely preoccupied the early modern mind. As shown above, Montaigne keeps insisting upon the incapacity of others to grasp one's real being (one's inner life, traits, etc.); his argument is quite direct: since "les estrangers[...] ne voyent pas mon coeur", they cannot understand me, they judge me wrongly, and the only solution for myself is to become my own judge; he is proud of "avoir estably un patron au dedans", and he boasts: "J'ai mes loix et ma court pour juger de moy, et m'y adresse plus qu'ailleurs" (III, 2, 785). His is, obviously, a recipe for individual independence, but also one that

implies deep moral solitude. Communication has been interrupted: je “m’y adresse plus qu’ailleurs”, that is, the modern mind prefers to speak to itself, rather than to engage in dialogue. The question can be raised, as to whether this strategy based upon monologue should be considered as a victory (that guarantees individual autonomy) or rather as *a strategy for avoiding conflict with others and a possible defeat*. To what extent should Montaigne be praised for having become his own and only judge, and to what extent should he be criticised for his moral isolation and for seeking refuge in solitude? One could suspect that, by claiming that it is only the ‘inner judge’ that counts, the modern man (as illustrated by Montaigne) simply avoids the judgement and critique of other people about himself. Is this a courageous moral self-assertion or mere cowardice, or perhaps both?

A long story about broken dialogue is told by Descartes too. His “je ne désire point me brouiller” is, as I have tried to show above, a clear refusal of dialogue. Generally, this attitude is perceived as mere rejection of scholastic debates and pseudo-knowledge. But, as already said, this perception is wrong. Descartes has a much more general complaint against dialogue, and his reluctance to accept it is based on deep disappointment with communication; his (above quoted) complaint was that “bien que j’aie souvent expliqué quelqu’unes de mes idées à des personnes de très bon esprit [...] lorsqu’ils les ont redites, j’ai remarqué qu’ils les ont changées presque toujours en telle sorte que je ne les pouvais plus avouer pour miennes”. This is a clear expression of disillusionment with human dialogue, and not mere disgust of scholasticism.

For Hobbes, the problem of communication simply is not on the agenda, because men are natural enemies and dialogue is thus excluded from the very beginning. But it is not irrelevant that pride,

vanity and selfishness transform human communication in pure aggression; according to Hobbes, “the tongue of man is a trumpet of warre, and sedition” (*De Cive, Dominion*, Ch. V, # V) – language is only used as a mean to hide reality and present Good as Wicked and Wicked as Good: “that art of words by which some men can represent to others that which is good in the likeness of evil; and evil, in the likeness of good” (*Leviathan, Of Commonwealth*, Ch. XVII).

Upon this point, Pascal agreed with Hobbes. He was convinced that men are characterized by an “aversion pour la vérité” which transformed dialogue in a “mutuelle tromperie”:

“Ainsi la vie humaine n’est qu’une illusion perpetuelle; on ne fait que s’entre-tromper et s’entre-flatter. Personne ne parle de nous en notre présence comme il en parle en notre absence. L’union qui est entre les hommes n’est fondée que sur cette mutuelle tromperie” (*Ibidem*, # 130).

And, exactly like Hobbes, Pascal connects this aversion to truth with vanity, i.e. with “l’amour propre”: “Il y a différents degrés dans cette aversion pour vérité; mais on peut dire qu’elle est dans tous en quelque degré, parce qu’elle est inséparable de l’amour propre” (*Ibidem*).

Thus, dialogue and communication are increasingly seen, in the XVIIth century, as failures - as unauthentic, sterile and even dangerous for human peaceful coexistence. Their negative connotations, so visible later, in the thinking of Rousseau - “les longs débats, les dissensions, le tumulte, annoncent l’ascendant des intérêts particuliers et le déclin de l’État” (*Du contrat social*, livre IV, Ch. 2) - are already present in the early modern period.

An interesting, although indirect, proof of the modern communication break is provided by the birth of the novel. According to Walter Benjamin, the very change from story-telling to novel-writing indicates an isolation of the self and a communication break:

“The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others”.<sup>28</sup>

If Benjamin is right, then we should see the birth of the modern novel as a result of the failure to communicate directly, and thus as a symptom of the increasing solitude of modern men.

The conclusion of this discussion, which could, of course, extend itself much more, should by now be quite clear: among the ‘shocks’ to which we could attribute the exacerbation of solitude, we should also count *the failure to communicate*.

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“Le monde n’est que variété et dissemblance”  
MONTAIGNE, *Essais*

The failure to communicate is inseparable from *a failure to cope with diversity*. One of the most important ‘discoveries’ of the modern mind was the confusing diversity that one has to face permanently.

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<sup>28</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, the essay *The Storyteller*, # V, Schocker Books, 1969, p. 87.

Montaigne justifies his retreat from the public stage by evoking the deep incompatibility between himself and others, an incompatibility due to the very different ways of judging things. He is surprisingly original in his attitude towards the dilemma: 'is it the common element or the differentiating particularities that prevail?' (on this extremely important point Montaigne has priority over Descartes and most classical philosophers): he treats the differences among men as more significant than their similarities – as he puts it, “au rebours du commun, reçois plus facilement la difference que la ressemblance en nous” (I, 37, 259). The option for solitude appears as a logical answer to the prevalence of individual differences over the general features of men: being different from all the others justifies living in a different way, which, of course, also implies living *separately* from others.

Descartes constantly complains of not being able to eliminate the confusing diversity of opinions and ideas that he encountered both in books and in the public debates of his age. Starting from the premise that truth must be unique - “n’ayant qu’une vérité de chaque chose” (*Discours*, p. 590) - as well as from the conviction that Reason is common to all human beings - reason is “tout entière en un chacun” (*Ibidem*, p. 569) - Descartes faces a crisis provoked by the amazing diversity of opinions and conceptions that he finds around him. Being unable to join one of the camps, he decides to ignore the whole mess and to turn into himself. And the fact that he perceived the intellectual diversity as a mess is confirmed by his conviction that ‘the science in books’ is a hopeless mixture of truth and error, useful and useless data:

“Quand bien même toute la science qui se peut désirer serait comprise dans les livres, si est-ce que ce qu’ils ont de bon est mêlé parmi tant des choses inutiles, et semé confusément dans un tas de si gros volumes, qu’il faudrait plus de temps pour les

lire, que nous n'en avons pour demeurer en cette vie" (*La Recherche*, p. 1107).

Moreover, the simple fact that "les sciences des livres" are the product of several authors is a proof that they cannot provide the truth (*Discours*, p. 580). In other contexts, Descartes refers to the cognitive techniques already used by men as the "mille règles diverses que l'art et la paresse des hommes ont inventées plutôt pour le corrompre que pour le perfectionner" (*La Recherche*, p. 1132). Cognitive diversity always has *negative connotations*, for Descartes: it is not only difficult to handle, or hard to use, but also suspect – it corrupts the mind, instead of helping it. His great hope is to put an end to this *scandal of intellectual diversity*, by discovering the one true method which necessarily leads to truth; but in order to do that, he must first of all separate himself from the corrupting mixture of opinions and methods characteristic for the received knowledge – and that is why he decides to isolate himself.

Pascal is even more preoccupied by moral, religious and intellectual diversity, which, to him, is a clear proof of "l'aveuglement et la misère de l'homme" (*Pensées*, # 393). He complains that the existent, opposing, doctrines have triggered "la guerre ouverte entre les hommes" (*Ibidem*, # 258). He deplores the variety of opinions and of laws (the famous "Vérité au deçà des Pyrénées, erreur au delà" - # 230, and the complaint that "on ne voit rien de juste ou d'injuste qui ne change de qualité en changeant de climat" –*Ibidem*; see also # 233: being or not being a murderer depends upon a frontier); he accuses even more vehemently the diversity of manners and religions, "cette inconstante et bizarre variété de moeurs et de créances" (# 407) – his conviction that this variety corrupts is affirmed more explicitly than in Descartes' work: "La corruption de la raison paraît par tant de différentes et extravagantes moeurs" (# 423). But exactly

like Descartes, Pascal evokes the same problem faced by Reason: confronted with such a variety of beliefs, “la raison ne peut pencher plutôt vers l’une que vers l’autre” (# 407). The result of diversity is that man is “sans lumière, abandonné à lui-même, et comme égaré dans ce recoin de l’univers” (# 393). What should be done, then? According to Pascal, we should retreat from this world and its apparent values (“tout ce qui nous incite à nous attacher aux créatures est mauvais”) and search for God (“s’il y a un Dieu, il ne faut aimer que lui, et non les créatures passagères” - # 433).

For Hobbes too, diversity is a main source of Evil. One of the features that differentiate men from animals is that “in a multitude of men there are many who supposing themselves wiser than others, endeavour to innovate, and diverse Innovators innovate diverse wayes, which is a mere distraction, and civil warre” (*De Cive, Dominion*, Ch. V, # V). More generally, men are characterized by the fact that “each one hath his owne will, and his peculiar judgement concerning all things that may be propos’d” (*Ibidem*, Ch. VI, # 1); diversity makes agreement among them difficult if not impossible, and this is the main reason for which they cannot defend themselves against abuse and invasion:

“because that divided in their opinions they will be a hinderance to each other, or if they agree well enough to some one action through hope of victory, spoyle, or revenge, yet afterward through diversity of wits, and Counsels, or emulation, and envy, [...] they will be so torn and rent, as they will neither give mutuall help, nor desire peace” (*Ibidem*, Ch. V, # IV).

In the *Leviathan*, the argument is more synthetic: “being distracted in their opinions concerning the best use and application of their strength, they do not help, but hinder one another, and reduce their

strength by mutual opposition to nothing" (Part II, Chapter XVII). But the most explicit and the most convincing argument advanced by Hobbes is the following:

"we may consider that there is in men's aptness to society a diversity of nature, rising from their diversity of affections, not unlike to that we see in stones brought together for building an edifice"

(*Leviathan*, Part I, Ch. XIII).

The "asperity and irregularity" (*Ibidem*) to be found among men, similar to that of stones, create one of the biggest problems for society, one of mutual accommodation; and when these asperities and irregularities cannot be eliminated, some men must simply be cast out, like stones that are cast out by builders, for being "unprofitable and troublesome" (*Ibidem*). Hobbes obviously condemns deviant individual conduct, but he also presents diversity as 'troublesome'.

Now, if we put together all these significant remarks made by 'the founding fathers' of modernity, we can easily understand what *the shock of diversity* was. Confronted with (what was probably perceived as) *wild diversity* generating *ruthless competition* and *acute conflict*, the modern mind felt as if *under siege* - under a siege that diversity lays to it. And one simple (perhaps the simplest) way to deal with such a crisis was, of course, *retreat* and *isolation*. Opting for isolation implied, certainly, a failure to cope with diversity, and that is why we can see this failure as a main source for solitude. Unable to find a moral *modus vivendi* with his contemporaries, Montaigne isolates himself and preaches isolation as an ideal; unable to deal with the received knowledge and its problems, Descartes isolates himself and looks for a personal foundational method; unable to cope with intellectual and axiological diversity, Pascal retreats into a

personal search for God. As to Hobbes, his failure to cope with diversity can be deduced from his option for absolutism.

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It goes without saying that these strategies of isolation *invented by modern thinkers as solutions to a crisis provoked by several shocks* - among which the shock of hatred, the shock of estrangement, the discovery of 'inwardness' and the failure to cope with diversity - have had a lot of positive consequences both for the social and for the individual evolution of modern men; and one of the most important of their consequences has been the development of an emancipatory individualism. The problem, then, is not that of condemning individualism as being rooted in defensive strategies; it is rather that of getting a better understanding of it, of its resources and of its vulnerable components, by recognizing its true origin, which appears to have initially been a crisis, not a big discovery or a big achievement. A sort of *fatigue* seems to have affected various thinkers, from Montaigne and Hobbes to Descartes and Pascal: a sort of exasperation with other people, a kind of failure to cope with diversity, hatred and estrangement, have pushed them towards isolation and solitude. But the solitary ways they have chosen proved extraordinarily fruitful. It seems that big victories sometimes come by assuming defeat: intellectual isolation led to new, generally applicable, although essentially individual, intellectual methods, like Descartes' *dubito*; recognition of the fundamental solitude of men led to new social (contractualist) foundations – natural isolation suggested political individualism, and political individualism stimulated the birth of a new political order; moral isolation led to the development of moral autonomy. In a word, *the abandonment of dialogue led to a new culture of dialogue*. Solitude, as personal refuge sought by some great thinkers, proved to be a rich field for discoveries; and lonely ways,

*Adrian Paul Iliescu*

chosen by some courageous minds, led to inventions of great public interest. But these happy results do not confirm the standard description of modernity as a triumphant march: Montaigne, Descartes, Hobbes were not, in fact, working as proud conquerors of new peaks. Rather, they were just some of those who, as Pascal says, “cherchent en gémissant” (# 333); and solitude was both their refuge, and their field of (re)search.

Seeing the exacerbation of solitude as a main root of modernity has one remarkable advantage: that of helping us to understand the amazing omnipresence of solitude in the most various moments and fields of modern life and culture. Indeed, if there is one topic which is inevitable and which keeps recurring all the time, everywhere, that is the topic of solitude. Were one tempted to write a *saga of solitude* in modern times, it would not be difficult at all to find material for many volumes; but it would take a lot of time to put together the huge number of facts which are available and relevant. And an *Encyclopaedia of Solitude* would be a very thick volume, which many people would have to work at. Given the permanent complaint about solitude, it is almost amazing that no classic philosopher ever tried to produce a system based upon the premise that “all is solitude”, claiming that solitude is the stuff our world is made of. “Solitude is all” could have been an excellent motto for modernity; for, in contradistinction to the pre-modern times, modern solitude does not appear *as mere contingency* – it looks more like one of the main roots of modernity.

Berlin, July 1999

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## *Institute for Advanced Study*

### ***Starting Point***

The New Europe College is a small independent Romanian “center of excellence” in the humanities and social sciences. It was founded in 1994 by Professor Andrei Pleșu (philosopher, art historian, writer, 1990/91 Romanian Minister of Culture, at present Minister of Foreign Affairs), as a private foundation subject to Romanian law.

### ***Aims and Purposes***

- to create an institutional framework with strong international links offering young Romanian scholars in the fields of humanities and social sciences working conditions similar to those in the West: individual grants enabling them to focus on their research projects, access to modern technical equipment, an environment that stimulates the dialogue between different fields of research and encourages critical debate
- to cultivate the receptivity of scholars and academics in Romania towards methods and areas of research as yet not firmly established here, while preserving what might still be precious in a type of approach developed, against all odds, in an unpropitious intellectual, cultural and political context before 1989: this was, to be sure, a context that hindered the synchronizing of local scholars with the state of research in their disciplines in other parts of the world. But scientific life under the authoritarian regime also led – paradoxically, one might say – to original ways of questioning, to a long-term strategy of research that eluded intellectual, financial, and on occasion even political restraints; and such an approach deserves perhaps to be taken into account in a Europe undergoing a process of reshaping and confronting itself with unprecedented challenges

- to promote contacts between Romanian scholars and their peers worldwide
- to contribute to the forming of a core of promising young academics, expected to play a significant role in the renewal of Romania's academic, scholarly and intellectual life

***Academic Program: NEC Fellowships and RELINK Grants***

Each year, ten **NEC Fellowships** for outstanding young Romanian scholars in humanities and social sciences are publicly announced. Fellows are chosen by an international Academic Advisory Board, and receive a monthly stipend for the duration of one academic year (October through July). Under the supervision of the Scientific Director, Fellows gather for weekly seminars to discuss their research projects. Guest scholars from Romania and abroad are invited for talks, seminars and symposia, attended not only by the Fellows, but also by graduate students, academics and researchers from outside the College.

In the course of the year, the Fellows are given the opportunity to pursue their research for one month abroad, at a university or research institution of their choice. At the end of the grant period, the Fellows submit a paper representing the results of their research. These papers are subsequently published in the New Europe College Yearbook.

***The RELINK Program*** targets preferably young, highly qualified Romanian scholars returning from studies abroad to work in one of Romania's universities or research institutes. Ten RELINK Fellows are selected each year through an open competition; in order to facilitate their reintegration in the local research milieu and to improve their working conditions, a modest support lasting for three years is offered, consisting of: funds in order to acquire scholarly literature; an annual allowance enabling the recipients to make a one-month research trip to a foreign institute of their choice in order to sustain existing scholarly contacts and forge new ones; the use of a laptop computer and printer.

### **Financing**

To date, the activities of the New Europe College have been financed by German and Swiss foundations (*Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft, Volkswagen-Stiftung, Zuger Kulturstiftung Landis & Gyr*), the *Swiss Department of Foreign Affairs* and, in the case of the RELINK Program, the *Higher Education Support Program* of the *Open Society Institute*, Budapest.

### **Founder of the New Europe Foundation and the New Europe College:**

- Dr. Andrei PLEȘU, Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs; Professor of Philosophy of Religion, University of Bucharest

### **Academic Advisory Board**

- Dr. Horst BREDEKAMP, Professor of Art History, Humboldt University, Berlin
- Dr. Iso CAMARTIN, Writer, Specialist in Romansh Literature and Culture, Zürich
- Dr. Daniel DĂIANU, Professor, Academy of Economic Sciences, Bucharest
- Dr. Dr. hc. Wolf LEPENIES, Rector Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin; Professor of Sociology, Free University, Berlin
- Dr. Gabriel LIICEANU, Professor of Philosophy, University of Bucharest; Director of the *Humanitas* Publishing House
- Dr. Andrei PIPPIDI, Professor of History, University of Bucharest, President of the National Commission for Monuments, Bucharest

### **Administrative Board**

- Dr. Victor BABIUC, Romanian Minister of Defense
- Maria BERZA, Secretary of State, Romanian Ministry of Culture
- Heinz HERTACH, Director, Zuger Kulturstiftung Landis & Gyr, Zug, Switzerland

*Adrian Paul Iliescu*

- Dr. Helga JUNKERS, Volkswagen-Stiftung, Hanover
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- Dr. Heinz-Rudi SPIEGEL, Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft, Essen
- Dr. Şerban STATI, Director, Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Dr. Ilie ŞERBĂNESCU, Economist, Producer, "PRO TV"

***Executive Committee***

- Marina HASNAŞ, Executive Director of the NEC
- Heinz HERTACH, Director, Zuger Kulturstiftung Landis & Gyr, Zug
- Dr. Anca OROVEANU, Scientific Director of the NEC; Associate Professor at the Institute of Fine Arts, Bucharest