

ARTICLE

# A Defence of Lichtenberg

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## Abstract

Cartesians and Lichtenbergians have diverging views of the deliverances of introspection. According to the Cartesians, a rational subject, competent with the relevant concepts, can come to know that he or she thinks – hence, that he or she exists – on the sole basis of his or her introspective awareness of his or her conscious thinking. According to the Lichtenbergians, this is not possible. This paper offers a defence of the Lichtenbergian position using Peacocke and Campbell’s recent exchange on Descartes’s *cogito* as a framework for discussion. A thought-experiment will be presented involving two communities with radically different conceptions of the metaphysics of the self. The purpose of the thought-experiment is to suggest that a substantive metaphysical thesis, whose truth cannot be a priori known, is presupposed by any justified transition from one’s introspective awareness of a certain mental activity to the self-ascription of that activity.

**Keywords:** *cogito*; Lichtenberg; self; collective thinking

In a recent exchange, Christopher Peacocke and John Campbell revisited the vexed question whether the *cogito* can in principle be used to attain knowledge of one’s own existence (Campbell 2012; Peacocke 2012). Besides its obvious relevance for the exegesis of Descartes’s thought, this question underlies a long-standing contrast between two opposed views of the deliverances of introspection. On one view, a rational subject, competent with the relevant concepts, can come to know that he or she thinks – hence, that he or she exists – on the sole basis of his or her introspective awareness of a conscious thinking. On the alternative view, this is not possible: a conceptually disciplined exercise of introspection reveals, at best, the obtaining of various mental states, but not the fact that the introspecting subject is, in the appropriate sense, the ‘owner’ of those states. The first position – which validates the *cogito* – may be associated with Descartes himself; the second – which calls the *cogito* into question – belongs to the German physicist and philosopher Georg Lichtenberg, according to whom through introspection “we know only the existence of our sensations, representations and thoughts. *It thinks*, we should say, just as we say, *it lightnings*” (Lichtenberg 2012: 152/Sudelbuch K 76).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>I do not claim this to be the only or the most exegetically accurate interpretation of Lichtenberg’s objection to the *cogito*, though see Tester (2013) for a defence. As I am understanding it here, the dispute

This paper offers a defence of the Lichtenbergian view, using Peacocke and Campbell's reconstruction of the *cogito* as a framework for discussion. I will begin by identifying a principle that the Cartesian view needs to invoke in order to explain how we can be justified to self-ascribe the mental activities of which we are introspectively aware – I will call it the *Entitlement Principle* (§1). I will then describe a thought experiment involving two communities with radically different views of the metaphysics of the self (§2) and argue that the most plausible interpretation of this thought-experiment is one on which the principle is false (§3).

My reasons for focusing on Peacocke and Campbell are chiefly dialectical. Initially, the contrast between Cartesians and Lichtenbergians may seem to be based on a clash of phenomenological intuitions, with the Cartesians claiming that all our experiences present themselves to us as belonging to one and the same 'self', and the Lichtenbergians protesting that such 'selves' (if they exist) make no appearance in our ordinary conscious life. But this way of understanding the debate is not the most fruitful. Even setting aside general concerns about the reliability of phenomenological intuitions (see, e.g., Schwitzgebel 2008), it is hard to see how we could make any progress towards settling a dispute in which one party invokes the intuitive plausibility of one claim to support one thesis and the other party invokes the intuitive plausibility of the opposite claim to support the opposite thesis. In the absence of independent arguments showing which claim (if any) should be trusted, we would be stuck with a stalemate of intuitions. And when it comes to phenomenology, independent arguments are both hard to come by and difficult to adjudicate.<sup>2</sup>

Peacocke and Campbell's discussion of the *cogito* has the virtue of avoiding controversial assumptions about the self-involving vs. self-excluding nature of conscious experience. Though I disagree with the conclusions they draw from their discussion, I will be following the same policy of *phenomenological neutrality* throughout the paper. This means that, strictly speaking, mine will be a conditional defence of Lichtenberg: I think that, *if* we don't base our assessment on contested phenomenological claims, we should share Lichtenberg's scepticism towards the *cogito*. This result should be of interest to those who believe that conscious experience is self-involving (because it shows that their view is essential to a defence of the *cogito*), to those who believe that conscious experience is self-excluding (because it shows that, on their view, the *cogito* can be plausibly called into question), and to those who believe that the *cogito* can be defended independently of the self-involving vs. self-excluding nature of conscious experience (because it directly challenges their position).

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between the 'Cartesian' and the 'Lichtenberg' view rests on three substantive presuppositions: first, that we can be *introspectively aware* of our own mental states (or, equivalently, that there is such a thing as introspective awareness); second, that we can sensibly ask what one can know or justifiably believe *on the sole basis* of introspective awareness (or, equivalently, that we can isolate the contribution of introspective awareness from that of other epistemic sources); third, that, even if forming the belief that one exists on the basis of one's introspective awareness of one's own conscious thinking is a reliable method for forming true beliefs, there remains a question as to whether the beliefs formed through this method are *justified* (or, equivalently, that there is a workable notion of epistemic justification that is not purely reliabilist). Each of these presuppositions can be called into question, but since none of them is completely implausible I will not try to defend them here. Instead, I propose we take them for granted and ask ourselves what follows on the assumption that they are true.

<sup>2</sup>Contemporary defenders of the phenomenology of self include Strawson (1997), Zahavi (2003), Billon (2015, 2017) and Duncan (2015) (see also Gallagher and Zahavi (2016) and Zahavi and Kriegel (2015) for general discussion). Recent critics include Hossack (2006: 228), Howell (2006: 44), Dainton (2008: 243), Bermúdez (2011: 163–5) and Prinz (2011).

### 1. The *Entitlement Principle*

In his recent paper “Descartes defended” (2012), Peacocke offers the following reconstruction of Descartes’s *cogito*:

First, Descartes engages in

(1) a particular conscious thinking;

second, he moves from this conscious event to the judgement

(2) I am thinking;

third, from (2) he infers

(3) I exist

(Peacocke 2012: 110)

In what follows, my focus will be primarily on the first step in the transition (1)–(3). I do not think that the second step is entirely unproblematic, but I take it that the Lichtenbergian view gives us no special reason to resist it. Indeed, Lichtenberg’s claim that we should avoid formulating the starting point of the *cogito* using the first person would be hard to understand if the truth of ‘I am thinking’ failed to require that ‘I’ refers, which is what the step from (2) to (3) makes explicit.

Peacocke points out that the step from (1) to (2) should not be understood as an *inference* whereby Descartes, having endorsed the proposition ‘I am engaging in a particular conscious thinking’ deduces from it the proposition ‘I am thinking’. Rather, (1) is supposed to describe a mental state of which Descartes is introspectively aware and (2) the content of a judgement that Descartes forms on the basis of this awareness. The crucial question for our purposes is whether Descartes’s judgement can be *justified* by that awareness and, consequently, whether Descartes can *know* that he’s thinking on the pure basis of introspection.<sup>3</sup>

In principle, the answer to these questions could be made to depend on one’s views about introspective awareness – ‘yes’ if it is assumed that in being introspectively aware of one’s own thinking one is also aware of oneself as the author of the thinking, ‘no’ if introspective awareness is taken to exclude the self. The problem is that it’s hard to see how we could assume either of these two views at the start without invoking phenomenological intuitions that at least some participants in a debate about the validity of the *cogito* will find dubious. Peacocke’s approach allows us to bypass this difficulty. He takes the starting point of the *cogito* to be a kind of awareness that neither encompasses nor excludes the self – not awareness of *oneself* as thinking, nor awareness of some kind of *subjectless* thinking, but simply awareness of one’s *thinking*.<sup>4</sup> He then invokes two principles that together explain how such awareness can secure knowledge of the fact that one is thinking. The first principle asserts that there is a tight connection between the first-person concept and the concept *thinks*, in that:

- (a) [A]ny plausible account of the nature of the concept *thinks* entails that to possess it involves taking one’s own conscious thinking as conclusive reason for self-applying the concept of thinking in the present tense. (Peacocke 2012: 120–1)

<sup>3</sup>More precisely, what’s crucial is the first part of the question: under the plausible assumption that the *cogito* is not a case in which a true and justified belief can fail to constitute knowledge, the presence or absence of *justification* is the most natural point of disagreement between Cartesian and Lichtenbergians.

<sup>4</sup>This could be taken to be awareness of a particular token event – as Peacocke’s terminology appears to suggest – or as awareness of a property – as in Dretske’s (1999) ‘p-awareness’.

The second principle asserts that

- (b) [I]f someone judges a content on grounds that are, as a matter of the nature of one or more concepts in the content, conclusive grounds for judging the content, then the content so judged is knowledge. (Peacocke 2012: 120–1)

Since nothing in the Lichtenbergian view conflicts specifically with (b), I will concentrate on (a). (a) says that it is built into the nature of the concept *thinks* and the first-person concept that, whenever a subject competent with these concepts is introspectively aware of what is, in fact, his or her conscious thinking, he or she has conclusive reason to judge ‘I am thinking’. The idea is that one’s competence with the relevant concepts will allow one to ‘bridge’ whatever epistemic gap there may be between the introspective awareness of a certain mental activity (e.g., a particular conscious thinking) and the self-ascription of that activity (e.g., a judgement with the content ‘I am thinking’).

In his response to Peacocke, Campbell (2012) seems to reject this idea in favour of a more ‘Lichtenbergian’ approach. He suggests that, if one is “genuinely open-minded about [one’s] own existence” and is struck by a conscious thought, one may fail to regard oneself as having the right to move from that to ‘I am thinking’. Instead, one “might say something like ‘I am thinking, if there is any such person’. Or better, one might use the kind of formulation proposed by Lichtenberg: ‘There is thinking’” (Campbell 2012: 366–7).

But these suggestions only *appear* to contradict (a). Note that (a) speaks of a conclusive reason for self-applying the concept *thinks* in the present tense. Given (b), a conclusive reason must be one that speaks so strongly in favour of judging a certain content as to be able to support knowledge of the content. Now, Peacocke doesn’t say whether anything else beyond the capacity to support knowledge is required of a reason in order for it to qualify as conclusive. But, elsewhere, he suggests that even a conclusive reason can in principle interact with other reasons in such a way as to leave the subject without all-things-considered, doxastic justification for judging the relevant content.<sup>5</sup> I shall put this by saying that a reason can be *conclusive* without being *indefeasible*. Given this distinction, the fact that one could be (as Campbell puts it) ‘open-minded’ about his or her own existence is neither here nor there with respect to the truth of (a). For even if one’s conceptual competence and introspective awareness provide one with conclusive reason for believing that one exists, as (a) says, there remain all sorts of defeating grounds one might be given for being so open minded.

In effect, Campbell himself makes it clear that he is not interested in questioning the legitimacy of the first step in the transition (1)–(3). What interests him is the idea that “possession of [the first-person concept] may already require that one knows of one’s own existence” (Campbell 2012: 366) and that, since the *cogito* does not explain our possession of that concept (but, rather, presupposes it) the source of such knowledge must lie “somewhere quite outside the range of *cogito*-style reasoning” (Campbell 2012: 365). Note that none of this contradicts the claim that the first step in the transition (1)–(3) results in knowledge of (2) whenever the subject possesses the first-person

<sup>5</sup>For example, “my confidence that something is a proof can be rationally undermined by the report of mathematicians whose competence I have reason to believe far outstrips my own. Nonetheless, a proof is a conclusive ground” (Peacocke 2004: 30). I take it that, when my confidence that something is a proof is rationally undermined, I can no longer *base* any belief on that proof, hence I may be unable to form a doxastically justified belief in the relevant proposition. For discussion of the notion of ‘all-things-considered’ (or ‘ultima facie’) justification, see Senor (1996).

concept and the concept *thinks*. The point is only that for the first step in the transition (1)–(3) to result in knowledge of (2) Descartes must have knowledge of (3) *already*.

As it turns out, then, both Peacocke and Campbell can be said to agree on a common point, namely that:

[*Entitlement Principle*] Whenever a rational subject, competent with the first-person concept and the concept *thinks*, is introspectively aware of his or her conscious thinking he or she has (at least) a conclusive entitlement to judge ‘I am thinking’.<sup>6</sup>

I speak of *entitlement* to signal that, for all the principle says, the subject might not be able to appreciate the fact that he or she is aware of a conscious thinking as his or her reason for judging ‘I am thinking’. If the subject had to be able to do this, we would presumably need some account of how one can know or justifiably judge ‘I am introspectively aware of a conscious thinking’, and it’s hard to see how such an account could be put forward without triggering a vicious regress. Instead, the fact that one is introspectively aware of one’s own conscious thinking should be regarded as a condition whose obtaining conclusively justifies one to judge ‘I am thinking’ *if* one possesses the relevant concepts and *whether or not* one actually grasps that condition.<sup>7</sup> In a context in which all parties agree to a policy of phenomenological neutrality – avoiding any assumption about the self-involving vs. self-excluding nature of conscious experience – this seems the most plausible line to take for the defender of the Cartesian view. So, for the purpose of assessing the prospects of that view, it is useful to set aside the differences between Peacocke and Campbell, and focus on the *Entitlement Principle* itself. The thought-experiment I will introduce in the next section is meant to bring into focus the reasons why I find this principle problematic.

## 2. The monoselfists and the poliselfists

Imagine two communities of rational thinkers with radically different views on the metaphysics of the self – the monoselfists and the poliselfists.

The *monoselfists* believe that each normally functioning human brain promotes the existence of a single self (I use the term ‘promotes’ without any metaphysical connotation – some monoselfists regard the self as wholly distinct and independent from the brain; others treat it as a broadly physical entity). For the monoselfists, any instance of thinking is an instance of the thinking of a particular self. So, based on their competence with the first-person concept and the concept *thinks*, whenever the monoselfists engage in conscious thinking, they feel justified to form a judgement with the content ‘I am thinking’. In other words, they regard the kind of transition exemplified by the move from (1) to (2) as epistemically warranted.

The *poliselfists* disagree. They believe that each normally functioning human brain promotes the existence of *several* selves – a sensitive self, a deliberative self, a desiderative self, etc. (again, ‘promotes’ is meant to be neutral on the exact relation between the selves and the brain; some poliselfists are dualists, others are not). The poliselfists regard thinking as a *cooperative activity* carried out by the brain’s many selves. So, based on his

<sup>6</sup>I say ‘at least’ because, as we’ve just seen, Campbell takes possession of the first-person concept to require *knowledge* of (and not only justified belief in) one’s own existence.

<sup>7</sup>For discussion of the notion of entitlement, see Peacocke (2004: 7). If one finds this notion problematic, one can take the first step of the *cogito* to involve a transition between judgements – for example, from a judgement with the content ‘This is a conscious thinking’ (where ‘this’ is an introspective demonstrative) to a judgement with the content ‘I am thinking’ – and modify the *Entitlement Principle* accordingly. The objections I will raise against the entitlement-based approach in §3 carry over to this alternative strategy.

or her competence with the first-person concept and the concept *thinks*, whenever a member of the poliselfist community engages in conscious thinking, he or she does *not* feel justified to judge, on this basis, ‘I am thinking’, but, at most, ‘We are thinking’. In other words, the poliselfists regard the kind of transition exemplified by the move from (1) to (2) as epistemically unwarranted.

It is important to get the poliselfist ideology right. We sometimes apply a predicate to several things collectively. For example, we may say of certain premises that they ‘imply’ a certain conclusion, meaning that they *jointly* imply that conclusion, not that the conclusion is implied *by each of them*. (We may put this by saying that the conclusion is implied by the set of the premises, but that is a sloppy way of talking, for certainly *sets* don’t imply things.) The poliselfists make a similar use of ‘thinking’ and its cognates. For example, they say of certain selves that they ‘believe’ a certain proposition, meaning that they *jointly* believe that proposition, not that the proposition is believed *by each of them*. (They may put this by saying that the proposition is believed by the set of the selves, but that is also a sloppy way of talking, for certainly *sets* don’t believe things.) It is because they take the thinking of which they are introspectively aware to be the collective activity of *several* selves that the poliselfists refrain from forming judgements with the content ‘I am thinking’. *That* is the source of their disagreement with the monoselfists.

We can imagine various reasons why the poliselfists conceive of human thinking in the particular way they do. One possibility is that they arrived at their view through a particularly radical interpretation of the thesis that our mind comprises several distinct and mutually independent ‘modules’. Another is that, having been impressed by the existence of certain kinds of dissociative disorders, they found it convenient to regard the condition of a normal human being as one in which several selves think ‘harmoniously’ or ‘in unison’. How exactly we fill in these details does not matter much; the essential point is that, however extravagant and far-fetched it may sound, Poliselfism is not the kind of doctrine which is altogether impossible for a rational subject to embrace. In particular, it is not impossible for a rational subject to embrace Poliselfism with full strictness – refusing to ever replace claims such as ‘Those selves are thinking that p’ with ‘That group of those selves is thinking that p’, or other singular paraphrases.<sup>8</sup>

I want to suggest that reflection on the disagreement between the monoselfists and the poliselfists can be used to put pressure on the *Entitlement Principle*. To this end, let me make three further points of clarification.

The first point concerns conceptual competence. I said that the poliselfists can be competent with both the first-person concept and the concept *thinks*. Given that they refrain from judging ‘I am thinking’ even at times when they are introspectively aware of a conscious thinking, some might be tempted to deny these claims. I will defend the view that a poliselfist can possess the concept *thinks* in the next section. Here, let me focus on the first-person concept. Suppose we adopt Peacocke’s own characterization of this concept, according to which:

[T]he first-person concept is individuated by this condition: that in any event of thinking in which it features, it refers to the subject who produces that thinking, that is, to its agent. (Peacocke 2012: 109)

<sup>8</sup>From now on, my focus will be exclusively on this ‘strict’ version of Poliselfism. For discussion of the reasons why singular paraphrases may be found objectionable, see Oliver and Smiley (2013: Ch. 3). In addition to those reasons, a poliselfist may be moved by various sorts of ontological concerns – for example, she may refuse to admit abstract objects like sets or mereological composites like groups in her ontology.

Then a good case can be made that the poliselfists do *not* lack the first-person concept. To see why, imagine we were to ask a poliselfist why she refrains from judging ‘I am thinking’ even at times when she is introspectively aware of a conscious thinking. It seems plausible to think that she would answer our question by criticizing the conception of thinking it presupposes. She would tell us that, contrary to what we are accustomed to assuming, wherever there is a human thought featuring the concept ‘I’, there isn’t any such thing as *the* subject who produces the thinking. The thinking is produced collectively by several selves, hence there isn’t any particular self (or entity of any kind) for the concept ‘I’ to refer to. Now, it seems to me that an answer of this sort, far from showing that our interlocutor *lacks* the first-person concept, would be a firm indication that she understands and respects its constitutive condition of application, as specified by Peacocke in the quote above. It is true that – in at least some contexts – our interlocutor doesn’t use the concept as we do. But, intuitively, this is because her unusual views about thinking stand in the way of her doing so, not because of an imperfect grasp of how ‘I’ works.

It is also useful to see that, while the poliselfist’s use of the concept would differ from ours in certain contexts, it would be exactly like ours in others. For example, it is perfectly possible for a poliselfist to believe that, though human thinking is the cooperative activity of several selves, divine thinking is the activity of a single, unified self – so that, unlike us, God *can* justifiedly and truthfully judge ‘I am thinking’. If someone were to ascribe to God statements in the first-person, the poliselfist would understand and report such statements in the same way we do. That would be further evidence of her competence with the concept *I*.<sup>9</sup>

Second point. I said that, whenever they engage in conscious thinking, the poliselfists *feel unjustified* to judge ‘I am thinking’. I now submit that, in imagining the epistemic situation of the poliselfists, we can coherently suppose this feeling to be correct. As we’ve just seen, a believer in Poliselfism has reasons to think that the ‘I’ in ‘I am thinking’ fails to refer whenever the judgement is formed by a normal human being. If one believes in Monoselfism, one may well find these reasons weak and unconvincing. But it is not difficult to imagine that the poliselfists might have accumulated so much empirical and testimonial evidence in favour of their view that it would be irrational of them to give such reasons less weight than they do, and go on to believe ‘I am thinking’ in spite of them (the evidence in question may of course be misleading, but that’s beside the point).

Note that the resulting supposition will be that the poliselfists lack all-things-considered justification to judge ‘I am thinking’ at times when they are introspectively aware of a conscious thinking. This supposition does *not* beg the question against the *Entitlement Principle*, which speaks of a conclusive entitlement to judge ‘I am thinking’. As was pointed out in the last section, a conclusive entitlement need not be an indefeasible entitlement. It is possible that the poliselfists lack all-things-considered justification, not because they do not have any conclusive entitlement (contrary to what the *Entitlement Principle* would predict), but because their entitlement was defeated by the reasons they have for not using ‘I’ in introspective reports. In a moment, I will look at these interpretative options in more detail.

Third and last point. I said nothing about ‘what it is like’ to be a poliselfist, but I submit we are free to stipulate that (modulo their different beliefs) their

<sup>9</sup>Peacocke’s reflexive account of the first-person concept is standard. But note that an analogous reasoning would yield the same conclusion under the assumption that the first-person concept is descriptive in nature, as in the account defended by Howell (2006).

phenomenology does not differ significantly from that of the monoselfists.<sup>10</sup> The point of this stipulation is to rule out one possible explanation of the epistemic difference between the monoselfists and the poliselfists: if the two communities share the same phenomenology, we can safely assume that the reason why they are in different epistemic positions vis-à-vis the transition from (1) to (2) must lie either in their competence with *thinks* and the first-person concept, or else in their diverging beliefs involving those concepts.

I note in passing that the first of these three points gives us good reason to resist Campbell's suggestion that possession of the first-person concept "may already require that one knows of one's own existence" (Campbell 2012: 366). If possession of the first-person concept required knowledge of one's own existence, the poliselfists would have to be said to lack that concept – for knowledge requires belief, and no poliselfist believes 'I exist'.

But let us go back to the *Entitlement Principle* on which both Peacocke and Campbell agree. Recall that, according to that principle, whenever a rational subject, competent with the first-person concept and the concept *thinks*, is introspectively aware of his or her conscious thinking he or she has a conclusive entitlement to judge 'I am thinking'. Given the three points I have just made, the poliselfists are rational subjects who, despite being competent with the first-person concept, and being introspectively aware of their own conscious thinking do *not* have all-things-considered justification to judge 'I am thinking'. This leaves us with three possible ways of explaining their epistemic condition:

- (A) They lack the concept *thinks*, so the fact that, when they engage in conscious thinking, they do not have all-things-considered justification for judging 'I am thinking' shows nothing about the truth or falsity of the *Entitlement Principle*.
- (B) They possess the concept *thinks* and the *Entitlement Principle* is true. However, their belief in Poliselfism acts as a *defeater* of a conclusive entitlement they have for judging 'I am thinking' whenever they engage in conscious thinking.
- (C) They possess the concept *thinks* and the *Entitlement Principle* is false. However, the belief in Monoselfism provides monoselfists with the *auxiliary evidence* needed for their *cogito*-judgements to be justified.

Options (A), (B) and (C) are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive. For either the poliselfists possess the concept *thinks* or they don't. And if they do, either the *Entitlement Principle* holds or it doesn't. If it does, we need an explanation of why the poliselfists do *not* have all-things-considered justification to judge 'I am thinking' (and, given the stipulation that the two communities share the same phenomenology, the explanation will have to do with how their belief in Poliselfism *counteracts* any epistemic entitlement they share with the monoselfists). If it doesn't, we need an explanation of why the monoselfists *are* all-things-considered justified to judge 'I am thinking' (and, given the stipulation of phenomenological parity, the explanation will have to do with how their belief in Monoselfism *supplements* whatever epistemic warrants they

<sup>10</sup>In particular, we can stipulate that, if the experiences of the monoselfists are characterized by a distinctive 'sense of mineness', the same applies to the experiences of the poliselfists (except that the poliselfist will call it 'sense of ourness' rather than 'sense of mineness'). This marks a crucial difference between the poliselfists and patients who suffer from Cotard's and other kinds of depersonalization syndromes. For discussion of the connection between such syndromes and the phenomenology of mineness, see Billon (2015, 2017).



share with the poliselfists). In the next section, I will make a case for (C) and against the *Entitlement Principle*.

### 3. The conceptual possibility of collective thinking

Consider the following central tenet of Monoselfism:

(T1) If there is thinking, there is some x who is the author of that thinking.

It seems clear that, for option (B) to be true, (T1) must be something that we have conclusive a priori justification to believe. For (B) requires the truth of the *Entitlement Principle*, which says that possession of the first-person concept and the concept *thinks* is sufficient to have a conclusive entitlement to judge 'I am thinking' whenever one is aware of one's conscious thinking. Now, it is hard to see how possession of the two concepts could secure a conclusive entitlement to judge 'I am thinking' whenever one is aware of one's conscious thinking if possession of the concept *thinks* does not even secure conclusive justification to believe that, when there is thinking going on, there is *something* (or *someone*) who is the author of the thinking. And to say that possession of the concept *thinks* secures such justification just is to say that we have a priori justification to believe (T1).

But the apriority of (T1) is also required by the truth of (A). For according to (A), the poliselfists lack the concept *thinks*. And the only plausible reason to believe that the poliselfists lack that concept has to do with their seemingly deviant view that thinking can be the cooperative activity of several selves. Only if this view is a priori false (because (T1) is a priori true) is there plausible ground for denying the poliselfists' competence with *thinks*.

Thus, both (A) and (B) require that (T1) be a priori. But is (T1) a priori? In particular, does the concept *thinks* preclude the possibility of collective thinking? In order to get ourselves in a position to answer these questions, let us make two assumptions. First, let us assume that we can treat the concept *thinks* as a stand-in for any of the concepts expressed by ordinary psychological predicates, including 'believe', 'judge', 'be aware' and 'know'. This seems appropriate if we agree that Descartes "could equally have formulated his argument in terms of other conscious properties" (Peacocke 2012: 111). Second, let us assume that our ordinary practice of assertion involving those predicates is a good (if defeasible) guide to what possibilities the corresponding concepts do or do not preclude. I want to argue that, given these assumptions, our willingness to make collective use of psychological predicates such as 'think', 'believe', 'judge', 'be aware' and 'know' provides good (if defeasible) evidence that (T1) is *not* a priori. Let me explain.

When I first introduced their view, I said that the poliselfists conceive of each instance of human thinking as the cooperative activity of several selves. It is because they conceive of human thinking in these terms that the poliselfists make collective use of predicates such as 'think', 'believe', 'judge', 'be aware' and 'know'. They apply such predicates *jointly* to several selves. Clearly, this is not how we ordinarily use psychological predicates when describing the mental activities of which we are introspectively aware. But there are plenty of other occasions in which we too use psychological predicates in a collective fashion:

Everyday life is full of statements such as the following: 'The union believes that management is being unreasonable,' 'In the opinion of the court, this law is unconstitutional,' 'Our discussion group thought it was a great novel,' 'Our family believes in ghosts,' 'Bill and Jane have concluded that it would be wrong,' 'We

knew we had to stop'. These appear to be ascriptions of *collective* cognitive states. That is, what is claimed to have a given cognitive state is understood to comprise *two or more* human beings. (Gilbert 2004: 96)

Gilbert points out that the examples mentioned in this passage can be classified into two classes, depending on whether or not the relevant psychological predicate is ascribed to several individuals which are also presumed to constitute a *single* group or social entity of some kind (e.g., a union, a court, a family). But, as Gilbert also observes, group talk can easily be paraphrased into plural talk. For example, "with respect to belief, one might say either, 'Population P believes that p', or, equivalently, 'The members of population P (collectively) believe that p.'" (Gilbert 2004: 96).<sup>11</sup> This means that each of the examples above can in principle be seen as one in which we are saying of *several* individuals that they carry out a certain mental activity (for example, 'believing that management is being unreasonable'), meaning that they *jointly* carry out that activity, not that the activity is carried out *by each of them*. Variations on this theme are rife in the recent literature on collective epistemology: a jury may believe that the defendant is innocent, even if not all jurors would endorse this proposition (Lackey 2015: 3); the FBI may have had knowledge of a cluster of facts highly pertinent to 9/11 even if none of its members did (Goldman 2004: 17); the crew of the *USS Palau* may know that it is heading NNW at 14.2 knots even if such knowledge is not possessed by each and every member of the crew (Bird 2014: 46).

There may be an initial temptation to regard these examples as distracting, saying that they involve what is best regarded as loose or metaphorical talk. However, several arguments have been made that plural psychological ascriptions should be taken seriously (see Gilbert 1989; Nelson 1993; Searle 1995; Tuomela 1995; Bratman 1999). If we take these arguments to establish the minimal point that examples like the ones above *can* be regarded as literally true – i.e. that their literal truth cannot be ruled out a priori – how should an advocate of options (A) or (B) deal with such examples? I can think of three replies, and none of them strikes me as fully convincing.

One reply would be that the examples under consideration fail to establish the conceptual possibility of collective thinking without individual thinking. Bill and Jane, the components of a court of justice, the agents of the FBI, etc. are all thinking individuals. The fact that they can satisfy certain psychological predicates collectively without the predicate being satisfied by each of them doesn't show that there can be thinking without at least some individual *x* who thinks.

But this reply misses the point. (T1) doesn't just say that, wherever there is thinking, there is some *x* who thinks. (T1) says that, wherever there is thinking, there is some *x* who is the author of that thinking. To appreciate the difference between these formulations, consider a 'homuncular' version of Poliseifism according to which the thoughts of which we are introspectively aware can be ascribed, collectively, to several selves, each of which thinks, in turn, his or her own thoughts. The holder of such a view may well concede that there cannot be thinking without some *x* who thinks. Nevertheless, she will insist that we are *not* justified to judge 'I am thinking' at times when we are introspectively aware of a particular conscious thinking. If any thinking of which we are introspectively aware is performed *collectively* by several selves, there won't be any single individual for 'I' to pick out as *the* author of such thinking – no matter whether the selves in question *also* think their own thoughts. Reflection on this point shows that, if it is to support the *Entitlement Principle*, (T1) must be understood as saying that

<sup>11</sup>Note that the availability of such singular-to-plural paraphrases doesn't remove the reasons why the poliseifists might refuse to accept plural-to-singular paraphrases. See footnote 10.

every instance of thinking *is* an instance of the thinking of a particular individual, not just that every instance of thinking *presupposes* individual thinking. The proposed reply doesn't help to make a claim along these lines any plausible.<sup>12</sup>

A second reply points to the existence of a deep difference between the kind of mental activities we are willing to ascribe collectively to several individuals, and the kind of mental activities of which we are introspectively aware. The starting point of the *cogito* is one's awareness of one's own *conscious* thinking, and it may be said that none of the examples I mentioned involves a type of collective thinking that is also conscious. So it may be suggested that, even if (T1) is not a priori, we could uphold the *Entitlement Principle* – and vindicate options (A) or (B) – by appeal to the apriority of:

(T2) If there is *conscious* thinking, there is some x who is the author of that thinking.

One basic problem with this reply has to do with its last step – the claim that (T2) is a priori. I agree that we do not ordinarily conceive of consciousness – especially phenomenal consciousness – as the kind of property that can be collectively instantiated by several individuals. But I am not sure that this observation alone suffices to show that, unlike the concept *thinks*, the concept *consciously thinks* excludes the possibility of collective application.

Consider how consciousness is discussed in certain scientific contexts. In particular, consider the influential hypothesis that consciousness correlates with the capacity of a system to process and integrate information (Tononi and Koch 2015) and the related suggestion, recently discussed by List (2018: 313) and endorsed by Schwitzgebel (2015), that very large and functionally integrated groups, perhaps designed on the model of a neural network, can be collectively conscious.<sup>13</sup> No doubt these suggestions are hugely controversial. But precisely the fact that we regard them as *controversial*, and not as outright *incoherent* seems to me to indicate that (T2) is not a priori. If (T2) were a priori true we would have to be in a position to rule out 'from the armchair' what, to all appearances, are best seen as empirical hypotheses.

Granted, it is not part of our ordinary practice of assertion involving predicates like 'consciously think' to apply such predicates collectively to many individuals. But there is a difference between saying that collective uses of 'consciously think' are not part of ordinary practice (something which is entirely neutral on whether (T2) is a priori) and saying that it is part of ordinary practice to *prohibit* such uses (something which would support the apriority of (T2)).<sup>14</sup> I don't see any clear evidence of the existence of such a prohibition. On the contrary, I think one could plausibly argue that, if the hypotheses I have just described turned out to be correct, the idea of collective consciousness would become common currency among ordinary speakers. This would

<sup>12</sup>In addition, I'm not sure it can be plausibly maintained that, as far as the ordinary concept *thinks* goes, collective thinking must *always* be grounded in individual thinking. Scientists have repeatedly invoked notions like 'swarm intelligence' and 'distributed cognition' to explain the behaviour of wasps, bees, ants, termites and even bacteria (cf. Bonabeau *et al.* 1999). At least some of these cases could be seen as involving collective thinking that emerges from the complex interactions of non-thinking entities.

<sup>13</sup>See also Nozick (1981: 71) for some related speculations on collective consciousness. For a fuller defence of this idea, see Schmid (2014) and Pacherie (Forthcoming).

<sup>14</sup>It may be said that our intuitive reaction to Block's (1978) 'Chinese nation' scenario betrays precisely an unwillingness to ascribe consciousness to pluralities of individuals. But note that Block himself regarded his thought-experiment as an intuitive challenge to *functionalism*, not to the idea that consciousness might be collectively instantiated. A proponent of this idea is not committed to thinking that consciousness may be collectively instantiated by the Chinese nation.

not be a 'change of topic' on our part, so much as the realization of a possibility left open by the concept of consciousness we actually employ.

The third reply points to a difference, not between two different kinds of mental activities – those we are willing to ascribe to several individuals collectively and those of which we are introspectively aware – but between different *concepts* of mental activities in general. It may be said that collective uses of psychological predicates involve 'external' concepts of psychological conditions – concepts that are applied 'from the third-person perspective', in the context of ordinary language or scientific practice – whereas the *cogito* is concerned with an 'internal' concept of thinking – a type concept that each of us is supposed to apply 'from the first-person perspective', in the context of introspecting his or her own thinking.

Now, consider a concept *thinks*<sup>+</sup> which resembles *thinks* in every respect, except that it excludes the possibility of collective application. If *thinks*<sup>+</sup> could be shown to be our 'internal' concept of thinking, the *Entitlement Principle* could be vindicated by appeal to the apriority of:

(T3) If there is thinking<sup>+</sup>, there is some x who is the author of that thinking<sup>+</sup>.

The fact that neither (T1) nor (T2) are a priori would be beside the point.

The success of this line of response depends on whether its proponents can show that our internal concept of thinking is, indeed, *thinks*<sup>+</sup>, as opposed to a more liberal concept which allows for collective application. Note that it won't be enough to show that, as a matter of fact, our introspective awareness targets thinking<sup>+</sup> (the property picked out by *thinks*<sup>+</sup>) rather than thinking (the property picked out by the ordinary concept *thinks*). One will also have to show that the property of thinking<sup>+</sup> wears the impossibility of its collective instantiation on its sleeves, in the sense that this aspect of its nature is somehow 'transparent' to any subject introspectively aware of it. (Compare: the mere fact that the substance of which we are perceptually aware in being aware of water is H<sub>2</sub>O does not imply that, in forming judgements on the basis of that awareness, we are entitled to draw on the a priori rules governing a concept as demanding as H<sub>2</sub>O – water does *not* wear its chemical composition on its sleeves).

Here our constraint of phenomenological neutrality becomes once again relevant. Both the claim that the non-collective nature of our thinking is introspectively 'transparent' to us and the claim that we have direct introspective evidence for the existence of a self are likely to be endorsed by some and rejected by others on the grounds of phenomenological intuitions that we have little or no independent basis to assess. Thus, it seems we should not be moved by the strategy of appealing to the apriority of (T3) in a context in which it was agreed to shun appeal to such intuitions. The question whether conceptual competence can guarantee a justified transition from (1) to (2) should be settled by reference to the psychological concepts we actually employ – not to those we *could* employ given a controversial construal of the phenomenological data.

Where does all this leave us with respect to the dispute between Cartesians and Lichtenbergians?

#### 4. Polselfism and the *cogito*

In the last section, I argued that (T1) – the principle that wherever there is thinking, there must be some x who is the author of that thinking – is not a priori true. This implies two things. First, that we have no ground to deny that the polselfists possess the concept *thinks*. There is nothing *conceptually* wrong in the idea that thinking

might be the cooperative activity of several selves. Second, that the right explanation of the epistemic difference between the monoselfists and the poliselfists is not the one offered by advocates of the *Entitlement Principle*. We shouldn't say that the belief in Poliselfism acts as a defeater of an epistemic entitlement the poliselfists have for judging 'I am thinking' whenever they are introspectively aware of their own conscious thinking. Rather, we should say that there isn't any such entitlement in the first place.

This result, if correct, poses a serious challenge to the Cartesian view. Recall that the *Entitlement Principle* was supposed to explain, in phenomenologically neutral terms, how a rational subject can justifiably move from his or her introspective awareness of a particular conscious thinking to the self-ascription of that thinking (§1). If the principle is rejected, an epistemic gap remains open and some auxiliary evidence seems to be called for in order to close it – evidence coming, not from introspection or a priori reflection, but from other a posteriori sources.

It is interesting to note that what are usually described as 'rationalist' interpretations of the *cogito* – i.e., interpretations according to which Descartes's knowledge of his own existence is *not* in any way based on his introspective awareness of a particular conscious thinking – are no less affected by this conclusion than the 'empiricist' one we have been focusing on so far.<sup>15</sup> Consider, for instance, Shoemaker's (1996) 'rationalist' take on how one can know that one exists:

"I think" is indubitable for a logical reason; it is a logically necessary condition of my being deceived about anything that I think, since being deceived is a matter of having false beliefs, which in turn is a special case of thinking – in the sense of "think" in question. "I think," like "I exist," is necessarily self-verifying, in the sense that it is a necessary condition of its being asserted, or even entertained in thought, that it be true. (Shoemaker 1996: 53)

I don't think we should be fully convinced by what Shoemaker says in this passage – at least, not if we take into proper account the possibility that 'I think' or 'I exist' might be collectively asserted or entertained in thought. Of course, it is a logically necessary condition of *my* being deceived that *I* think. But this is not sufficient to make 'I think' indubitable. If collective thinking is a logically viable option, it is logically possible that there be deception without a *single* deceived subject – hence without anything for the 'I' in 'I am being deceived' (or 'my' in 'my being deceived') to refer to. This means that it is *not* a logically necessary condition of 'I think' being asserted, or even entertained in thought, that it be true. I can judge 'I think' and, based on the possibility of Poliselfism, bring myself to doubt the truth of my judgement.

To put the point more clearly, let us say that a proposition *p* is a *priori self-verifying* when it is a priori (or, in Shoemaker's terminology, 'logically necessary') that any thought with *p* as its content must be correct. If we have no a priori grounds to rule out the truth of Poliselfism – or more in general, the possibility of collective thinking – it will not be a priori that any thought with the content 'I am thinking' must be correct. A collective thought with the content 'I am thinking' would *not* be correct – at least, not if a necessary condition for its correctness is that its subject term succeeds in referring to something. Hence, the proposition 'I am thinking' is not a priori self-verifying, contrary to what this and other 'rationalist' readings of the *cogito* have been assuming (cf. Williams 1978: 59; Burge 1996: 93).

<sup>15</sup>For the distinction between 'empiricist' and 'rationalist' interpretations of the *cogito*, see Billon (2015).

Some may be inclined to dismiss these observations as irrelevant to the validity of *cogito*. After all, compatibly with everything I have argued so far, one could accept a weaker version of the *Entitlement Principle* according to which:

[*Entitlement Principle*\*] Whenever a rational subject, competent with the first-person concept and the concept *thinks*, is introspectively aware of his or her conscious thinking he or she is, thereby, entitled to judge ‘Either I am thinking or we are thinking’.

It may be said that, since ‘Either I am thinking or we are thinking’ entails ‘Either I exist or we exist’, and ‘We exist’ entails ‘I exist’, the *Entitlement Principle*\* gets us back to what Descartes wanted, independently of whether the first step in the transition (1)–(3) is valid or not.

But this reasoning contains a fallacious step. To say that ‘We exist’ entails ‘I exist’ is to say that *every* context in which ‘We exist’ is true is a context in which ‘I exist’ is also true. Now, ‘We exist’ is true in a context if and only if the agents of the context exist, whereas ‘I exist’ is true in a context if and only if the agent of the context exists. If there are contexts in which certain individuals qualify as *the agents* of the context (plural) without any of them qualifying as *the agent* of the context (singular), we will have a counterexample to the entailment – a case in which ‘We exist’ is true while ‘I exist’ fails to be true because there is no single entity for ‘I’ to pick out. The contexts created by collective thoughts and assertions are precisely contexts of this sort. Suppose a court of three judges collectively asserts the sentence ‘We declare the defendant guilty, but I disagree’. The reason why we would be at a loss to interpret this sentence in the context created by the assertion is that, relative to such context, the three judges qualify as *the agents* (plural) without any of the three qualifying as *the agent* (singular). This means that ‘I’ cannot be assigned any referent, making it impossible for us to evaluate ‘I disagree’ (or any other continuation of the sentence in the first-person singular). A believer in Poliselfism will see the context relevant to the assessment of any of the thoughts of which we are introspectively aware in the same way. By her lights, a thought with the content ‘I exist’ cannot be true if ‘I’ needs to refer to *the agent* that produces the thinking (singular) and, by hypothesis, there isn’t any such agent.

If these considerations are on the right track, the *Entitlement Principle*\* gives us strictly *less* than what Descartes wanted. The truth of the principle would leave us with a position according to which introspection and a priori reflection put one in a position to judge, not that one is thinking, but only *that one or more* things, indexically referable through ‘I’ or ‘we’, are doing the thinking of which one is introspectively aware.<sup>16</sup> The introspecting subject would be stuck with an irreducibly disjunctive judgement, from which he or she could infer, at most, ‘Either I exist or we exist’. Whatever the merits of this position, it is not the Cartesian one.

## 5. Conclusion

Let me conclude. The aim of this paper was to outline a conditional defence of the Lichtenbergian view that introspection and a priori reflection do *not* provide an adequate basis for attaining knowledge of one’s own existence. My defence relied on a thought-experiment involving communities with radically different views on the metaphysics of the self. I have been arguing that, if we adopt a phenomenologically

<sup>16</sup>A ‘rationalist’ version of this position would appeal to the logical indubitability of ‘Either I am thinking or we are thinking’. The worries I raised about the *Entitlement Principle*\* apply to it as well.

neutral stance, the most plausible interpretation of this thought-experiment is one on which the *cogito* fails, in both the ‘empiricist’ version discussed by Peacocke and Campbell and the ‘rationalist’ version defended by Shoemaker. If my diagnosis is correct, even when introspective awareness informs us about the obtaining of various mental states, conceptual competence does not license us to self-ascribe them and know, on this basis, that we exist. Of course, we *do* exist and we *do* know that this is so. But, whatever the source of such knowledge may be, it lies outside the scope of what a rational thinker can come to know ‘from the armchair’, i.e., prior to and independently of any epistemic engagement with the outer world.<sup>17</sup>

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