



## *Philosophy, the Conquest, and the Meaning of Modernity*

### A Commentary on “Anti-Cartesian Meditations: On the Origin of the Philosophical Anti-Discourse of Modernity” by Enrique Dussel

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**Abstract:** This is a commentary on the article “Anti-Cartesian Meditations: On the Origins of the Philosophical Anti-Discourse of Modernity” by Enrique Dussel published in this issue of the journal. According to the author, Dussel’s Anti-Cartesian Meditations suggest the following conclusions for a revisioning of the discipline of philosophy: (1) If, as Rorty suggests, the meaning of philosophy is simply the history of philosophy or whatever philosophers discuss, then European philosophy does not understand what philosophy is because it does not understand its own history of philosophy; (2) Given that Descartes’ skeptical, reasoning “I” is produced through conquest, and the claim of comparative supremacy of the specific individual against its cultural others, this is hardly a good foundation for a truly rational modernity. Such a source of reasoning is neither sufficient nor reliable in terms of knowing one’s self or knowing others, or certainly in knowing how one’s own ideas and beliefs are related to or influenced by those of others; (3) The revision of the history of rationalism, modernity, and epistemology suggested in Dussel’s account suggests a new way to understand the relationship and connection between secularism and rationalism, loosening the hold of the sometimes dogmatic assumption that secularism is the only route to rationalism; (4) Despite the intensity of Dussel’s critique, his work also suggests that there may be a way to usefully distinguish the modern from Modernity, or in other words to separate a genuinely normative sense of the modern as a reflexive operation of critique from the colonialist Modernity with its legacy of self-justification and false consciousness. In this case, there may be a way to salvage philosophy after all.

In his “Anti-Cartesian Meditations: On the Origin of the Philosophical Anti-Discourse of Modernity” (see the version on

[www.enriquedussel.com](http://www.enriquedussel.com) used for page citations below; it also appears in this issue of the journal) Enrique Dussel makes a major

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contribution to the developing work in post-colonial philosophy, an area or sub-field within philosophy that is not yet recognized by any major philosophical association or research department. Because this area of philosophy remains unrecognized, there is the real danger that Dussel's critical text will go unrecognized, just as Felipe Guaman Poma's did for so many generations. The problems and obstacles that Dussel analyzes in the history of philosophy have not by any means been solved, and they continue to threaten to disable the reception of his own contributions. In this commentary, therefore, I want to think through the issue of how Dussel's historical revisions affect the doing of philosophy, its conditions of reproduction particularly in contemporary graduate departments, and its own self-understanding of its history and current disciplinary definition.

Even today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are no required courses in post-colonial philosophy in any department in the Americas, no comprehensive exams or advisory committees in this area, no associations, conferences, or journals, no compendiums of the major papers, nor encyclopedic overviews. Nor do the various programming committees of the major philosophical organizations recognize this as an area that merits its share of panels at the annual conventions, alongside, for example, early modern philosophy or ethics. Post-colonial philosophy exists only in the sense that there exists scholarly work that would fit within such a rubric, but it does not exist in the sense of being an acknowledged reality or recognized category. "Post-colonial philosophy" is like the categories "alternative medicine" or "racism" or "sexual harassment" in the not too distant past, categories with a referent (plenty of referents, actually), but no recognized reality or accepted linguistic usage. Let me begin, then, with a characterization of what the area of post-colonial philosophy concerns, and how it relates to other sub-fields within the discipline, as a way of plac-

ing Dussel's own analyses within a legible framework.

The term "post-colonial" is meant to refer not to a period after colonialism but to the analysis of colonialism in relation to the formation of the modern capitalist world system.<sup>1</sup> Although most formalized systems of colonial administration have been dismantled, neo-colonialism is alive and well, colonialism lingers, and what Anibal Quijano calls the coloniality of power—or the organization of power and status through social identities constructed within colonial relations of production—remains as strong as ever in literature as well as in the meta-narratives of culture, history and global political conflict, the representations of the West and its others, and so on. Another way to put this is that colonial ideologies remain strongly influential of new discourses and new theories even in the contemporary moment. The project of post-colonialism is to trace out these influences, to search them out, even where we might imagine them not to have much relevance, as Dussel does here and in his other work in the philosophical sub-field of epistemology.

As we might imagine, colonial narratives have had the most influence over the canonical histories of western philosophy, its periodizations, its ways of categorizing the major periods, and its organization of geographical borders. Still in graduate schools today the history of philosophy is grouped within the following categories: Ancient (meaning fourth century Greece), Early Modern (meaning 17<sup>th</sup> century north-western Europe, excluding Spain), Modern (meaning the same area in the 18<sup>th</sup> century),

1. I'm going to set aside here the ongoing debates over whether using the term "post-colonial" is a good idea. Although critics of the term have made some good points (about the fact that it may be historically misleading, has emerged in the metropolises in some problematic ways, covers too diverse a set of projects and theoretical approaches, etc.), in my view the limitations of the concept are no greater than those of any other large and unwieldy and politically problematic category, such as "modernism" or even "Latin America."

and Nineteenth and Twentieth Century (including here England, Scotland, the U.S., Canada, Germany, Austria, and France). More recently the borders are opening up to include philosophy from the Netherlands, Italy and Poland (the latter for mostly Logic), but this is clearly still remarkably narrow. In fact, if anything, the last two decades have witnessed a further narrowing of philosophy graduate-level departments. Chinese and Indian Philosophy used to be commonly found but today these are rarely taught. Analytic philosophy has narrowed the arena of discussion to such an extent that the history of philosophy itself is no longer valued as a critical area to be covered in any department aiming for excellence.

Dussel's "Anti-Cartesian Meditations" provides a meta-philosophical argument made via the history of philosophy, and as such is doubly marginalized: marginalized because it takes up the history of philosophy as key to understanding the domain of philosophy proper, and marginalized because it goes outside the usual restricted areas included in that history. Dussel's analysis provides critical commentary on the field of philosophy itself by the means of a reclamation of important foundations of the field that lay outside its acknowledged geographical domain, as well as an argument that, to the extent the concept of modernity has normative force, its foundation also lies outside the domain identified as the "West." But this alteration of the history of philosophy has implications for the content of philosophy, and not simply for the way in which we teach its history.

There are two main meta-philosophical positions on how to define philosophy, and these contrasting positions correlate to alternative accounts of the relationship of the history of philosophy to philosophy proper.

The first view, held by such figures as Richard Rorty, holds that philosophy should be defined simply by the historical content of its conversations. That is, rather than hewing to an essential method or agreed

upon formulation of the great issues, philosophy should be understood as a dialogue, a Socratic dialogue, where the content of that dialogue cannot be set out in advance. As Rorty puts this, "There is only the dialogue."<sup>2</sup> Importantly, such a minimalist formulation is put forward by Rorty precisely in order to remain critically alive to the possibility of altering philosophy's own method and formulations, to remain open to historical transformation and cross-cultural challenges, and as a way to avoid cultural narrowness. Any other, more substantive, definition of philosophy would fall into such narrowness by presupposing an objectivity, a rationality, a critical methodology, a notion of philosophical rigor, all defined and fixed prior to transcultural engagement. This road is bankrupt, Rorty declares, arguing specifically that "the traditional Western metaphysico-epistemological way of firming up our habits simply isn't working anymore."<sup>3</sup> And on his view, if we give up on the belief in such a "trans-cultural rationality," all that is left is our continuous dialogue called philosophy. Thus, philosophy is coterminous with its history; in fact, it is defined *as* its history.

The second, alternative meta-philosophical position on how to define philosophy is more substantive, and would define it via a specified set of questions. As Bertrand Russell defined these, philosophy "aims at knowledge which gives unity and system to the body of the sciences."<sup>4</sup> Philosophy is restricted to the search for knowledge in metaphysics, logic, ethics, aesthetics, and epistemology. Such aims invoke

2. Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" in *Post-Analytic Philosophy* edited by John Rajchman and Cornel West. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, p. 15.

3. Ibid, p. 15. See also Dussel's critique of Rorty's position in chapter six of *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation* edited and translated by Eduardo Mendieta. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996.

4. See chapter XV of Bertrand Russell's *Problems of Philosophy*. London: Simon and Brown, 2013.

precisely the sort of delimitation of the field that Rorty worried would be arbitrary and self-limiting, by conferring legitimacy on those who would close the conversation around pre-determined formulations of the great questions, such as those that aim for an analysis of justified true belief, not gnosis, understanding, or persuasion. The language game of philosophy can be justifiably distinguished from ethnophilosophies, wisdom traditions, cosmographies, or other conversations that (coincidentally?) occur outside of Europe. It might also be ideologically grounded in ways it has no power to reflect upon.

We then have two alternative meta-philosophical positions about how to define philosophy: one that defines it in terms of whatever kinds of dialogue philosophers have, and the other that defines it via a specified content. The first runs into a circularity problem: without defining what philosophy is, how are we to accredit dialogic interlocutors with the title 'philosopher'? The second runs the serious danger of dogmatism, a supremely unphilosophical end, by setting into stone either a method or a set of privileged topics. Dussel's work helps us to become more politically and philosophically reflective about each of these formulations.

The problem with the conversation idea is that it is a continuous conversation among a restricted set—how is it determined who is included? How has the conversation been structurally affected by conditions of power? Who has been allowed to speak? The problem with the more substantive idea is that it polices the border of the language game via certain crucial questions that may be conditioned by external considerations unknown to the participants, i.e. a colonial unconscious. Thus, both approaches to defining the domain of philosophy need a post-colonial critique.

## I.

Dussel has correctly put his finger on the key element holding up western supremacist ideology, or the idea that the West deserves to control and lead the world, and that key element is the progressivist timeline embedded in a particular geographical movement. Success at overcoming other societies is itself taken as sufficient proof of merit. But such reasoning is no better than the reasoning that holds that a victim of torture is more likely to tell the truth, or that a woman with rocks tied to her ankles who does not float when thrown into a pond is thereby proved not to be a witch. Neither procedure has anything to do with truth, nor does the success of colonizing barbarities.

Yet the widespread assumption is that might, or success, does in fact make right in the sense that it establishes merit in the form of intellectual and cultural superiority. Hence we need not open the conversation, or rethink our tried and true formulations of the great philosophical problems.

One might plausibly hold that there is something natural about the phenomena of rising cultures—such as Spain was in the 16<sup>th</sup> century or England in the 18<sup>th</sup>—treating other cultures who are declining as cultural has-beens. Youth, in its firmness and strength, always has a tendency to disrespect the infirmities of old age. Yet the Incan civilization was actually not much older than the Spanish; its earliest period began around 1200 A.C.E., and its expansion into an Empire is dated only from the 1440s, a bare 50 years before the first European ships arrived. Its decline was not of its own making but the result of conquest. The progressivist teleology of Europe which sanctions its expansion by a belief in its own superiority is not the natural by-product of a culture on the rise but the result of false narratives, occluded histories, burned books, and murdered scholars.

Dussel analyzes some of the false narratives in some detail. The concept of “modernity” is the central protagonist here, the redemptive figure that justifies the unfortunate slaughters and redeems the weakened and scattered survivors of genocide and enslavement by their assimilation to a better world. In the narrative of modernity, though, there must be a “we” who are, or become, modern, constructed alongside a “they” who are not. Dussel suggests the “they” comes in two categories: the Orient, which consists of a competing rich culture but one that is in decadent decline, and another consisting of the “South of Europe” that has never at any time had anything intellectual to offer the world. Here he sometimes moves confusingly between time frames, from the 16<sup>th</sup> century when the “south of Europe” was indeed in mastery, to the 18<sup>th</sup> century when Spain and Portugal were now themselves consigned to the South. Today, clearly, the south of Europe is consigned to a pre-modern oblivion.

Given the restricted “we” of the modernist narrative, the protagonist of the story is exclusive and particular even while imagining itself as universal and unbounded. Thus we have Hegel’s unabashed claim that “Man discovers America, its treasures and its people”(4). This is the irrational unconscious which produces a self-contradictory narrative separating the universal “Man” from a particular group of people, an impossible narrative that only a consciousness steeped in *mauvaise foi* can accept without questioning. The obviousness of the modernist fallacies manifest, Dussel interestingly suggests, a bad conscience: “a restless conscience toward the injustice committed”(19). It is the desperation of an unacknowledged guilt that directs an otherwise critical and sane reasoning faculty to accept claims with insufficient evidence and outright contradictions, but that can provide reasons to resign oneself to the daily crimes of colonial empires.

But the principal element that makes

the modernist narrative operate effectively as a plausible truth is that the critique of the conquest has been ruled out of bounds since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when Las Casas lost, in every material sense even if not in an intellectual sense, his debate with Sepulveda. Sepulveda’s arguments, as convoluted as they were, became law and policy, while Las Casas’s were lost to the oblivion of isolated scholars. From this point forward, Dussel holds, “the right of the modern Europeans (and North Americans of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) to conquer the Planet would never again be discussed”(16). It is true that slavery came in for some small debate, with predictable results, and the rights of other cultures also merited some discussion, but it is striking that these neglected passages in Locke and Kant were largely ignored for 200 years until very recently.

Dussel claims that Sepulveda’s triumph established the concept of modernity, that is, its alibi. If modernity was thought to equal something like cultural advancement, a claim notably made in relative terms or in relation to other specified cultures, then modernity’s acquiescence to the colonialism that made its supremacy possible formed the foundation for the developments of modernist philosophy. The fact that modernist philosophy was aware at some level of its foundation in colonialism is manifest in its very attempt to develop an *ethical* and *political* justification for itself, and not just a meta-theoretical justification. This is an interesting claim.

## II.

Dussel seems to use the term “modernity” in his essay in two different senses: (1) as a normative or evaluative term, which distinguishes between better and worse modes of thinking, and (2) as a descriptive term denoting the historical period post-Conquest.

For example, when he claims in regard to Las Casas that “we are dealing with the most rationally-argued work of early Mo-

dernity—the first modern philosophy” (24), he is using both senses in the same sentence, to denote the historical time frame as well as the positive enactment of rational thought. We might keep these two meanings distinct by using “modernity” to refer to the historically and geographically bounded sense of the term, that which has the “restless conscience” and is the object of Las Casas’s critique, and using “modern” to refer to the positive element of thought that Modernity has falsely allocated only to itself. The modern in this latter instance, as he uses it to describe Las Casas’s arguments, is that which is, necessarily, directed against Modernity. But what, precisely, does Dussel mean by the normative sense of the term? What makes a thought, or a philosophy, modern? Merely that it is critical of Modernity?<sup>5</sup>

Dussel’s recasting of Descartes’ purported invention of modern philosophy can shed some light on this question. Descartes’ pride of place in the history of philosophy cannot be underestimated. As if from a dream, Descartes is portrayed as jumpstarting modernity single-handedly, and that much of the rest of modern philosophy is an engagement with Descartes. Thus he is the

5. In other works Dussel develops and elaborates on the concept “transmodern” as a way to avoid the progressivist, Eurocentric timeline that the historical term Modernity seems always to imply. Even the most transgressive post-modernists, as he points out, do not escape this teleology and thus do not avoid replicating Eurocentrism in their works. In contrast to modernity, ‘transmodern’ avoids connoting a center/periphery world structure and can more easily accommodate the idea that all parts of the colonial assembly line were involved in making modernity possible. ‘Transmodern’ enacts a simultaneity where ‘modernity’ lends itself to a backwards and forwards timeline and geographically exclusive center. (See Alcoff, “Enrique Dussel’s Transmodernism” *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Productions of the Luso-Hispanic World*. Vol. 1:3, 2012, pp. 60-68). In his “Anti-Cartesian Meditations...” Dussel is taking on the historical narrative of modernity but he is also, I am suggesting, using, as well as transforming the positive valence of the idea of the “modern.” The latter is not a descriptive term involving history and geography and is therefore not replaceable by the term transmodern.

Father, the *paterfamilia*, of all that develops from the point of his writing until now. His skeptical turn is credited with inaugurating epistemology, his individualism created the first discussions in philosophy of mind as well as founding liberal political philosophy, his ruminations of God and evil reinstated the integrity of the philosophy of religion from its long period of Scholastic dogmatism, and his dualist hypotheses instigated the development of metaphysics. Descartes is even credited with initiating the philosophy of science and of mathematics! Plato and Aristotle are important, to be sure, but it is Descartes that put philosophy on the firm ground of the individual’s reasoning intellect and made of it a fit collaborator with the burgeoning empirical sciences.

In recent years there have been new and interesting interpretations of Descartes that consider what his dream arguments might mean on multiple levels, and that, against previous decontextualized readings, develop analyses that refer to his European social context as playing an explanatory role<sup>6</sup> Feminists continue to debate whether Descartes’ mind/body dualism and rational individualism have more utility for feminists or anti-feminists. Derrida and Foucault famously debated the concept of madness Descartes uses, whether it was purely a rhetorical device with deconstructive effects on knowledge claims or had a referent in Europe’s growing fascination with the mad which led to the eventual development of disciplinary techniques. Epistemologists continue to debate the adequacy of his refutation of skepticism, and what its ultimate failure teaches us.<sup>7</sup> Without a doubt, Descartes’ rich discourses and meditations lend themselves to multiple readings, literary and psychological as well as philosophical.

6. See e.g. Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture*. New York: SUNY Press, 1987; and *Feminist Interpretations of Descartes* edited by Susan Bordo State College, PA.: Pennsylvania State press, 1999.

7. See e.g. Ernest Sosa *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge*. Volume One New York: Oxford, 2011.

Dussel's claim against the authoritative treatments of Descartes's role in the history of philosophy is, again, both historical and substantive, and addresses issues that are generally still ignored in the mammoth secondary literature. The central point is that Descartes is not a thinker without influences but, unsurprisingly, emerges out of an intellectual tradition just as the rest of us. Given the genuine importance of Descartes' writings, then, that (largely invisible) intellectual tradition that spawned Descartes deserves analysis and scrutiny, or one might say it merits analysis for having influenced such a thinker. Yet it has received little, and this is principally because Descartes' influences hail from what is now lumped into the category of the "south of Europe."

Dussel's evidence for this claim is cumulatively persuasive. Descartes was educated by Jesuits within the Jesuit tradition in which students were counseled to perform as individuals, to use their critical minds rather than only their capacity for memorization. This tradition was barely formed when Descartes began his studies: the Jesuit order was founded only in 1536. It came to the New World a short 13 years later, in 1549, and thus the development of Jesuit practice and thought was indelibly linked to the profound experiences of missionary work as well as management and institution building that it oversaw on a wide scale throughout the Americas. Thus Descartes' association with the Jesuits links him securely both to Spain and to the New World. The flow of intellectual influences across the Atlantic was both enormous and intense in this period, and thus it was not at all odd that Descartes studied logic from a work written by the well known Mexican philosopher of that period, Antonio Rubio.

There is more than a hint of coincidence in the method of Jesuit teaching and Descartes' later philosophical ideas. The need for a thorough and sustained 'examination of conscience' championed by the Jesuits in which the individual is led to a path of

self-reflection and self-examination maps easily onto the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, first published in 1641, in which Descartes provides an uncanny, and courageous for the times, reportage of his innermost doubts and debates.<sup>8</sup> Such self-examination is also clearly evident in Descartes' *Passions of the Soul*, a work published in 1646, devoted to a detailed account of the emotions.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Dussel traces Descartes' formative influences back to Fonseca, the Portuguese philosopher who influenced a generation of Jesuits. Fonseca's milieu was known as the Coimbrian philosophers and their principal topic of discussion was the concept of method, identified as "the art of reasoning about whatever probable question" (15). Another important influence Dussel tracks is Francisco Sanchez, the prestigious Portuguese philosopher who proposed to find a way to arrive at certainty through a process of doubt. Descartes' most influential work, *Discourse on Method*, published in 1637, attempts to set out the best way to conduct one's reasoning toward dispelling doubt and reaching truth, and in this text he uses doubt or the dubitability of a claim as an epistemic device for assessing the justificatory status of belief.<sup>10</sup>

In standard intellectual histories Descartes' influences are listed along with the late works of Aristotle, the Stoic school of Greek philosophy, and St. Augustine. Notice the mainly secular status of these influences (and Augustine's influences are less theological than concerning his self-examining, reflexive practice and his logical approach to questions of time and reality). One

8. Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy: In which the existence of God and the distinction of the soul from the body are demonstrated*, translated by Donald A. Cress 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Cambridge MA.: Hackett Publishing Co, 1993.

9. Rene Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul: An English translation of Les Passions de L'Ame*, translated by Steven H. Voss. Cambridge MA.: Hackett Publishing Co, 1990.

10. Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Related Writings*, translated by Desmond M. Clark. New York: Penguin Books 2000.

of the interesting implications of Dussel's contextualization of Descartes' ideas is that the move from religious to secular philosophy is not as sharp a break in philosophy as it is often made out to be. Descartes' own final capitulation to the omnipotent God who secures the reliability of our perceptual and rational capacities is often treated as if it was only written for the censors, and the Evil Demon he constructs to give structure to his doubts often gets revised as an entirely secular threat, à la the Matrix. Dussel suggests, by contrast, that Descartes' solipsistic consciousness—the unique individual that thinks—is founded in Christian theological traditions, a hypothesis that would be hard to assess fairly without knowing the Jesuit influences Dussel highlights. The focus here would not be on Descartes' stated theological commitments but on the praxis of a searching self-examination that puts one's amorphous thoughts and feelings to analysis, and not just one's beliefs.

So the link here between the secular epistemological focus on method and doubt, on the one hand, and the practice of self-examination within Christianity, on the other, is not made on the basis of accepted doctrine so much as it is a kind of analytical practice. And it is a practice which has the aim of reaching certainty, a value clearly spanning across the secular/religious divide to unite religious and scientific quests. This hypothesis might gain support from both Nietzsche and Foucault, who give symptomatic readings of the Christian tradition that reveal its central importance for the development of a heightened interiority, a sense of the infinite possibilities of the subjective self, as infinite as the universe beyond. Both Nietzsche and Foucault focus on the self-examinations instituted as requisite Christian practice since the Council of Trent that convened in Italy in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and promulgated the confessional as a central practice of the penitent.

If we were to add Descartes' formulation of epistemology into this narrative, we might then be motivated to explore anew

the role of certainty and individual self-examination in western epistemology, and to question these as necessarily central to the theory of knowledge. The quest for certainty, as many have noted, can lead to sterile projects on inconsequential matters and dissuade us from embarking on larger, more important, but more speculative and risky inquiry. We are much more likely to achieve certainty on mundane matters than matters of consequence. The centrality placed on individual self-examination steers us away from the idea that collective processes of knowing might indeed be more reliable than individual ones. In particular, the possibility of ideological influences on our individual certainties are unlikely to be uncovered in a purely individual process of self-examination; to uncover ideology, we need (speculative) social theory, as well as collectives of diverse knowers with whom we can compare notes.

Thus I see Dussel's revisionist recasting of Descartes' philosophy as not only historically important for improving the accuracy of the history of ideas—in which case philosophers would continue to cast this as a sideline issue of interest only to historians and not to philosophers. Rather, Dussel's revisions suggest new lines of philosophical inquiry into not only Descartes but also the various philosophical theories he is crediting with developing, from epistemology to the philosophy of mind. If we read these in the context of the Jesuit tradition, our mostly secular western philosophers of today might finally be persuaded that Descartes' legacy is more problematic than they usually perceive it to be. In any case, there is a need for a fresh look at his ideas to understand their true meaning.

If we accept the basic legitimacy of Dussel's arguments, arguments that bring in the scholarly work of numerous others, mostly working in Spanish, on the links between Descartes and the Spanish and Portuguese 16<sup>th</sup> century, Descartes need not be toppled from the throne of originator all the way to a



plagiarist imitator who provided no independent thought. This is not the argument Dussel is making as I understand it. But we cannot even assess the originality his ideas achieved without considering them against the background of Descartes' formative, known influences. Descartes himself remains a formative influence on others, an institution, and thus his position as Father of Modern Philosophy may be historically false but philosophically accurate. What is perhaps only of biographical interest is the role that Descartes apparently played in creating this legacy himself, when he declines to mention his influences and claims to have "invented" a new method for the achievement of certainty. But this provides further evidence in favor of Dussel's claim that Descartes inaugurated the *ego conquir*, the I who conquers, and that the foundation of western epistemology is based in an experience of global conquest and the consequent fallacious self-aggrandizement that follows.

### III.

Despite Descartes' obviously secure status as the formative influence on the developments of western philosophy after the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and Las Casas's equally obvious lack of influence, Dussel claims that Las Casas wrote the "first modern philosophy." Let us look again at these peculiar claims Dussel makes and how the concept of the modern might be reconstructed from his argument. Can we salvage the concept, retrieving something genuinely normative from its colonial legacy?

Dussel claims (1) that Las Casas wrote the first modern philosophy, and that (2) Las Casas wrote the first criticism of modernity, and that (3) it is on the basis of Sepulveda's effective defense of the Conquest that "Modern European Philosophy" was established. These three claims can be made consistent if we take the "Modern" in "Modern European Philosophy" to be the same as the modern of modernity. If this is the case, then

"Modern European Philosophy" is not modern, or not wholly modern, to the extent it is marred by a "restless conscience," a lack of self knowledge together with the absence of any skills or methods that might lead to self-knowledge. It is blustery, aggressive word play that theorizes justice and truth in the netherworld of male elite interrelationships while the enormous servant class scurries about its feet, unseen, unknown, and unremarked upon. Truly, this is not the sort of picture we generally associate with the modern period, the flowering of a reflective, critical thought.

Las Casas, then, is modern in the sense that he goes against this ethereal, transcending mode of thought and perception, to the extent he notices the class of servants, and more than simply noticing their labor, he notices their condition, their state, perhaps the expressions on their faces and what this may indicate about the subjective experiences of their lives. He takes note also of their cultural practices and beliefs, arguing that their behavior is just as predictable and conventional within this context as any Spaniard's. To be modern in this normative sense is to be materially and culturally aware, and to take one's immediate material and cultural surroundings as a fit subject, perhaps *the* fit subject, for philosophical thought.

So what conclusions does Dussel's Anti-Cartesian Meditations suggest for a revisioning of the discipline of philosophy? Four spring to mind:

- (1) If, as Rorty suggests, the meaning of philosophy is simply the history of philosophy or whatever philosophers discuss, then European philosophy does not understand what philosophy is because it does not understand its own history of philosophy.
- (2) Given that Descartes' skeptical, reasoning "I" is produced through conquest, and the claim of comparative supremacy of the specific individual against its

cultural others, this is hardly a good foundation for a truly rational modernity. Such a source of reasoning is neither sufficient nor reliable in terms of knowing one's self or knowing others, or certainly in knowing how one's own ideas and beliefs are related to or influenced by those of others.

- (3) The revision of the history of rationalism, modernity, and epistemology suggested in Dussel's account suggests a new way to understand the relationship and connection between secularism and rationalism, loosening the hold of the sometimes dogmatic assumption that secularism is the only route to rationalism.
- (4) Despite the intensity of Dussel's critique, his work also suggests that there may be a way to usefully distinguish the modern from Modernity, or in other words to separate a genuinely normative sense of the modern as a reflexive operation of critique from the colonialist Modernity with its legacy of self-justification and false consciousness. In this case, there may be a way to salvage philosophy after all.