

Cartesianism as a Social Epidemic: A Network Analysis Approach

Dr. Paolo Rossini

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It is a common view that ideas and viruses share key features such as stickiness, resilience, and contagiousness. A corollary of this view, popularized by such books as Malcom Gladwell's *The Tipping Point* (2002), is that epidemic models can also be used to explain “social epidemics” – when ideas and products become popular in an uncontrolled manner. In recent years, epidemiology in general has received great impetus from the rise of network analysis as an independent and interdisciplinary field of inquiry. Ever since its inception, the tools of network analysis have been employed to study the spread of phenomena as diverse as epidemics, wildfires, and earthquakes. Following these developments, this paper will give a concrete example of how network analysis can improve our understanding of the way in which new ideas were circulated throughout history. Taking as a case study the “father of modern philosophy” René Descartes (1596-1650), I will show how a network analysis approach sheds new light on the circulation of his ideas across Europe. I will illustrate how “connectors” (to borrow Gladwell's words) such as Constantijn Huygens and Marin Mersenne helped Descartes build a reputation by using their correspondence networks to spread the word about him across national and cultural borders.

Dr. Paolo Rossini is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow at the Erasmus School of Philosophy of Rotterdam. A historian of philosophy and science, with a doctoral dissertation on the life and mathematics of Giordano Bruno and specialising in the Renaissance and early modern period, he uses the interdisciplinary research field of Digital Humanities in the application of network analysis to historical research. His current project, titled “Cartesian Network”, combines quantitative network analysis and close reading of historical sources to study the diffusion of Cartesianism throughout 17th-century Europe.