

# HUSSERLIAN CARTESIANISM

And Its Relevance to some Contemporary  
Discussions on Consciousness

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„One cannot learn a language  
unless one already knows a language.”

(Jerry Fodor)<sup>1</sup>

**M**y paper will be divided into five parts. In the first part I shall investigate some aspects of what we usually call „Cartesianism” referring to views described by Descartes in the *Discourse* and the *Meditations*. In the second part, I offer an analysis of what we may consider Husserl’s Cartesianism. I argue that Husserl was a Cartesian, though not in the sense of the two substance theory of Cartesianism. In the third section I shall analyze Husserl’s criticism of Descartes. In the fourth part, I shall attempt to show that Husserl was one-sided in his judgement concerning Descartes’ thought. In the final section, I offer a brief overview of some trends in contemporary philosophy of consciousness, and argue that Husserl’s standpoint is a variation of what is usually called ‘mentalism’. I am seeking to demonstrate that some central problems in contemporary research of consciousness were already seen and formulated by Husserl.

## I

The term ‘Cartesianism’ is normally used to denote a metaphysical dualism between two independent substances, „mind” (*res cogitans*) and „body” (*res extensa*). That is how, for instance, John Searle understands Cartesianism in *The Rediscovery of the Mind*. In this dual-

ism, the emphasis is on the radical difference between two entities, mind and body, a thesis that is held to be inherent in Descartes' thought. At a closer view of Descartes' *Discourse and Meditations*, however, we must add to this popular conception of Cartesianism a series of other important features in Descartes' thought which equally deserve the term „Cartesianism“, since each of them originates in a basic sense in Descartes' thought and each of them has made a spectacular career in the history of philosophy. We can summarize these features under three headings:

- first, we may speak of Cartesianism in the sense of a *systematic* (or methodic) enterprise;
- secondly, in a *methodological* sense, and
- thirdly, in a sense which might be termed as the *Cartesian conception of subjectivity*.

Cartesianism as a systematic enterprise is based on the idea that our knowledge of the universe and ourselves can be both exhaustive and systematically organized into a comprehensive scientific whole. The Cartesian conception of a universal science is based on the assumption that not only parts and moments of the universe can be objects of unified scientific descriptions, but the totality of such parts or moments of the universe can be consistently described. The idea returns in Spinoza's thought, and in Leibniz's idea of a *mathesis universalis*. As is obvious, without this idea of Cartesianism as a systematic enterprise, the birth of the modern scientific world-view would have been impossible.<sup>2</sup>

Methodological Cartesianism concerns three aspects of Cartesian philosophy: the method of universal doubt, the establishing of indubitable certainty which was to serve as the starting point of a universal and deductive science, and the assumption of a transcendent guarantee which secures that our procedures are right. In some more detail: the method of universal doubt, or methodological skepticism, serves for Descartes to eliminate any false or unclear idea he had of himself and of the world. In contradistinction to dogmatic skepticism, Descartes' methodological skepticism does not have a positive doctrinal content; it asserts only that the philosopher is supposed to doubt anything until he has a clear and distinct idea of what he accepts as true. This skepticism, as Descartes points out, is provisional: as soon as the first clear and distinct idea is found, skepticism as a general standpoint dissolves; it does not dissolve however concerning any idea other than the one intuited as clear and distinct.

According to Descartes, indubitable certainty concerning one's own existence whenever one thinks of the „ego cogito“ is the first clear and distinct idea one finds. The *cogito* thus becomes the first principle of philosophy: beginning with this idea, and following the geometrical method, one can arrive at various other principles, such as the distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. This distinction serves to liberate scientific investigation concerning the realm of the *res extensa*.

In some of Descartes' arguments we find at the same time that a direct knowledge of God might even be more fundamental than the certainty of my own existence.<sup>3</sup> This is what we might call a double foundation of Cartesian philosophy. The idea of God as the most perfect being is, according to Descartes, the ideal of any kind of knowledge which

claims to be clear and distinct. The idea of God is at least as certain as the truth of mathematical propositions.<sup>4</sup> In Descartes' arguments, moreover, God is the guarantee that the first and indubitable starting point in our systematic thinking is not only an illusion; God is the ideal unity of knowledge and reality, of mind and body, in which the aspirations of a universal philosophy are fulfilled in a unique and perfect way. In other words, the concept of God in Descartes' philosophy is a descriptive necessity without which philosophy *more geometrico* would prove to be a failure.

The Cartesian conception of subjectivity is based on Descartes' thesis that, in any perception, it is not only an equality of the evidences which I perceive between the evidence of an object on the one hand, and the evidence of my perceiving of the object on the other; rather, as Descartes says, the perception of my perceiving something has a stronger evidential character than the object or the content of my perception.<sup>5</sup> The evidential or epistemological priority of the „perceiving myself in any perception” is a novelty indeed. For Aristotle, who already mentions the fact of apperception – that is the fact that, in any perception, I perceive my own perception – goes only so far as to say that „if we perceive, then we perceive that we perceive, and if we think, that we think”.<sup>6</sup> The Cartesian conception of subjectivity thus introduces a distinction which might be even more important than the doctrine of the two substances: the distinction between *subjective* evidence, that is an evidence which concerns my own conscious activities, and *objective* evidence, that is an evidence which is about the content of any of my conscious activities. In Descartes' view, the former has a stronger evidential character than the latter.

If there is a central concept of Cartesianism which may be considered as the common element in almost all the various conceptions of Cartesianism, then we have it in Descartes' thesis that the appreciation or my perceiving myself in any given perception, has a priority above all other forms of knowledge.<sup>7</sup> The thesis of the primacy of the subjective is not identical to the doctrine of the two substances; and I argue that it is not the latter which is central to Descartes' thought but it is rather the former which, from the point of view of a Husserlian Cartesianism, proves to be decisive in Husserl's philosophy. The doctrine of the two substances, if we are allowed to understand it in ontological terms at all, is only a derivation of the thesis of the primacy of the subjective. The thesis of the primacy of the subjective asserts that subjective evidence is immediate or direct, while objective evidence is mediated or indirect. Both have an evidential character, yet they are grasped differently, according to their relevant status. That is, in other words, their difference is *logical* and not ontological.

## II

Husserl's Cartesianism is to be understood on the basis of the various ramifications of the term „Cartesianism” explained briefly above. As Husserl explicitly says in the introduction to the *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserlian phenomenology is to be conceived of as a „new

form of transcendental philosophy”, a kind of „Neo-Cartesianism”. He adds however the rather surprising statement that this phenomenological Neo-Cartesianism „refuses to accept almost the whole known doctrine of Cartesian philosophy”.<sup>8</sup> I shall return later to the question whether Husserl’s statement concerning the difference between his phenomenology and Descartes’ philosophy is in fact so dramatic as he tends to think. In what follows however I shall investigate the problem of Husserl’s Cartesianism in two ways: first in the mirror of the above classification of the term „Cartesianism“, than in some more detail as to the fundamentally Cartesian features of Husserl’s thought. I shall use some basic texts by Husserl which formulate clearly and in a summarizing fashion his understanding of Cartesianism.

In general it may be said that we can find all the above types of Descartes’ Cartesianism in Husserl’s phenomenology: that is we find elements in Husserl’s thought of Cartesianism as a systematic enterprise, methodological Cartesianism and also the Cartesianism of subjectivity. As to the first, Husserl understood phenomenology as a systematic enterprise which, having clarified the most important methodological and principal questions, step by step expands its scope to all the possible fields of human knowledge. Through this expansion, phenomenology becomes ever richer both in its content and in its history, going so far as to prove to be an „infinite task” of the human race.

One must acknowledge that the method of Husserl’s „science” is not that of the Cartesian „more geometrico”; in methodology, Husserl’s Cartesianism lies not in the geometrical method but rather in the *epoche* in which Husserl relies on Descartes’ „methodological doubt”. Just as Descartes decides, as he himself writes, to destroy the „house” of all previous knowledge and build a new one in which each element is submitted to rigorous evidential inquiry<sup>9</sup>, Husserl too introduces his methodological doubt in which the naive and everyday belief in the existence of the world is suspended. Husserl’s *epoche* however is a more complicated phenomenon than is Descartes’ doubt. While Descartes’ doubt is in fact methodological and concerns only the view how we see the world and ourselves, Husserl’s *epoche* is a kind of „religious conversion”. In this conversion, we not only gain a *fundamentum inconcussum* on which the system of the sciences can be built up, but more, we arrive at a genuinely new look at ourselves and our world, a new viewpoint in which, besides the meaning of the sciences and that of philosophy, the meaning of human life and history becomes clear. Husserl’s complicated building of the various reductions which are based on the original act of the *epoche* makes the picture even more picturesque. In brief, all the various reductions are in a way parts of the Husserlian *epoche* in the sense that what is in principle initiated by the act of suspension (or bracketing) is applied and refined throughout the various reductions. Such reductions are for instance the eidetic reduction in which we grasp the essence of an object by imagining the same object in various situations and shapes: thus we can imagine the same tree as viewed from this or that angle, as blossoming or dried out, as alive or cut down, in the form of wooden instruments etc. What we grasp as the moment of identity in all these forms is equal to, according to

Husserl, the essence or *eidos* of a tree. All the various forms in which this *eidos* exists are aspects of the same *eidos*; that is, in contradistinction to the Platonic dualism, Husserl does not state any *chorismos* or gap between empirical forms and *eidos*, but rather considers all the factual and possible forms of a „tree” as belonging to the same *eidos* or essence of a „tree”.<sup>10</sup>

We have further in Husserl the transcendental reduction which locates the structure of all factual and possible eidetic forms as they are related to the conscious ego (according to the principle of apprehension); we also have the reduction of the natural sciences to their foundations in the life-world, and – to mention one more example – the absolute reduction in which the apprehensive moments are reduced to the absolute ego, the ego of all the possible structures and configurations of structures of any factual and possible experience.

For Descartes, the *cogito ergo sum* is a conclusion of an argument accepted as logically indubitable. Descartes’ *cogito* however is always the empirical, thinking I. For Husserl, this empirical thinking I is also submitted to the method of the *epoche* and is thus deprived of its natural or, as Husserl would say, psychological character. As Husserl explains, Descartes’ standpoint necessarily leads to what Husserl calls „transcendental realism”, that is to the standpoint that the peculiar evidence of my perceiving myself perceiving, though seen as different from the evidence of any object of perceiving, is still not understood in terms radically different from those of the objective world. For Husserl, Descartes confounds the psychological and the transcendental ego; that is, he does not clearly recognize the peculiar character of the evidence we gain as soon as we realize the ego’s central role in any kind of perception.<sup>11</sup> As Husserl says, any evidence is a grasping of something exactly as something.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, any evidence of particular objects can prove to be false, except the evidence we gain as soon as we grasp the subjective character of all evidences. In subjectivity, we have apodictic evidence, an evidence which cannot prove to be false, since falsity too contains the evidence of my own being false. This apodictic evidence concerns only the ego, that is the subjective element in any perceiving of my own perception. The „world” – that is the presumptive totality of our perception – cannot be evident in the same manner; its evidence is not apodictic. The ego of the *epoche* is not, as Husserl writes, part of the „world” nor is this natural world part of my ego.

Certainly, such a standpoint raises the danger of a Cartesianism in Searle’s sense. But if the ego is not seen as the same kind of entity as the world of the natural objects, then there is no ground to believe that Husserl followed Descartes into such a dualism of substances. According to Husserl, the ego is not at all a substance – it is rather the identical *substrate*<sup>13</sup> of all factual and possible perception, a pole of identity which is necessarily implied in any experience. Moreover, the Husserlian ego, although radically different from the presumptive world, cannot be considered as independent from its own objects, that is from the content of its own experiences. The content of experiences is termed by Husserl as „noema”; and the way in which such contents are experienced is termed by him

as „noesis”. Noesis and noema are correlates; none of them is existent without the other, and the structure of the ego is given precisely in this correlation, that is in the formal structure of such correlations. Husserl calls the investigation of this correlative structure „intentional analysis”.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the main characteristic of subjectivity in Husserl's thought is the ego's *Eigenheitlichkeit* or „ownness”.<sup>15</sup> In any experience, Husserl explains, the object of experience is given as 'something identical with itself'. This givenness is however not static; only in the flux of experience are we able to perceive the object as 'something identical with itself'. Or, as Husserl suggests, the identity of an object with itself is constituted in the explication of the perpetual flux of experience. Just as the object of experience is identical with itself before our perceiving it, and just as its identity can be grasped only in the flux of experience, the ego too is given before we perceive its presence in the experience itself; the ego's peculiar identity with itself however is grasped only during the process of perception.<sup>16</sup>

The ownness of subjectivity is a feature which makes any experience meaningful. Normally, we do not perceive a tree, but rather we perceive something in relation to our perception. An experience is always an experience belonging to a subject, an experience of somebody, of myself, a feature which is essential to experience as such. A tree is always perceived through its *qualia*; but among all the *qualia* in the perception of a tree, the *qualia* that a perception is necessarily my own perception (*mir-eigenes*), in which I perceive that I perceive, is perhaps the most essential one. To put it in the words of the adverbial theory of perception we could say that we never perceive a „tree” as such but rather we perceive „treeily” or „hously” or „worldly” in which the object of perception is a structural moment of the ownness-character of perception.<sup>17</sup> The perception of a „tree” as such, a tree in the objective-biological sense, is an abstraction of something which I perceive „treeily”. This character of ownness, and further this character of the „my own” which is there in any piece of experience, is what makes subjectivity so crucial to experience as such.

### III

The main emphasis of Husserl's Cartesianism lies in his understanding of subjectivity. In order to have a more precise understanding of this point, let us have a somewhat detailed look at Husserl's criticism of Descartes' thought. As mentioned above, Husserl has some polite words concerning Descartes' philosophy at the beginning of the *Cartesian Mediations* by recognizing his phenomenology as „Neo-Cartesianism”. If however we consider that at the same time he suggests the necessity of rejecting of „almost the whole content” of the Cartesian thought, we might attribute his words to the fact that, presenting the original version of his *Cartesian Meditations*, he spoke to a French audience. There are, then, two main passages in Husserl's main works which contain some substantial criticisms of the Cartesian thought.

The one is in *Cartesian Meditations*.<sup>18</sup> In the passage in question Husserl criticizes Descartes' conception of the ego or subjectivity in terms of a substance. For Husserl, a substance is an 'objective' entity; that is, an achievement of the subject's perceiving functions. On the other hand, the subject stands as it were outside the sphere of substances: the subject is the source of the substances, though not in the ontological sense of the word but rather taken from the point of view of the subject's perceiving processes. Thus, the subject itself cannot be a substance: it is, as mentioned above, rather a substrate, a pole of identity in the experience of substances which constitute, to use Husserl's expression, the world of substances.

Descartes however states that the evidence of the *ego cogito* is axiomatic: in this evidence, we discover the ontological difference between the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*, recognizing thereby the axiomatic position of *res cogitans*. From the *ego cogito* as the principle of absolute certainty we can deduce, by way of the geometrical method, a complete system of evidences which constitute the main structure of a universal science.

For Husserl, Descartes' position is equal to what he calls „transcendental realism” which, as Husserl says, is a *contradictio in adjecto*. If we have a transcendental position, we acknowledge that, besides the sphere of objective entities, we have a primordial sphere, a subjective one which is categorically different from the sphere of objectivity. The law of causality belongs to this latter sphere; to say that there is a causal connection between transcendental subjectivity on the one hand and its peculiar achievement or constitution „the objective world” on the other hand, is an inappropriate use of words. „Constitution” is not a causal process: it is the *way* in which we perceive ourselves and the world around us; it is the way human experience works. To say that this „way” is „something” in the sense as a tree is something and a perception is something, is to say that there is no categorial difference between something and the way something is perceived or given. But, Husserl argues, to say this is nonsensical: perception is always the perception in a certain way: it is always fragmentary, presumptive and is always in need of a complex *a priori* perceptual and conceptual scheme.

We find Husserl's second criticism of Descartes' thought in *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*.<sup>19</sup> Husserl's criticism is more detailed in this work than in the *Cartesian Meditations*. He addresses the following points in Descartes' thought: first, the question of the Cartesian *epoché*, second, the problem of the Cartesian *mens sive anima sive intellectus*; third, Descartes' purpose to apply the discovery of the first and indubitable truth in a way which hindered him from recognizing the genuine nature of his discovery. For Husserl, Descartes' methodological doubt was not at all consistent. Descartes „suspended” all his own earlier beliefs concerning the world, God and himself in order to arrive at the indubitable certainty of his own existence. Were Descartes more radical and consistent, he had been able to see that the subject of his indubitable certainty, the ego or subjectivity, cannot possess the kind of existence which we find in the objective world. In a radical suspension, Descartes should have suspended the belief in the existence of his

own ego as well. As Husserl suggests – although he does not go into detail in this respect – , if you suspend all your beliefs in the objective world, and if you are as an empirical person part of this objective world, you cannot conclude that, once you perceive some kind of thinking taking place at a certain moment, that there is an empirical person who actually thinks. The logically coherent conclusion is that, once I perceive some kind of mental process taking place, I realize that there is at least one mental process going on, there is thinking, without however supposing that there is also an empirical or quasi-empirical carrier of this thinking which Descartes calls *mens sive anima sive intellectus*. Husserl's point is that this *mens sive anima sive intellectus* can in no way be identical with an objective moment in the world; it is rather, as we have seen above, transcendental subjectivity, a subjectivity which stands in a way outside the content of perception.

The reason why Descartes did not see this point was, according to Husserl, that he pursued some new 'scientific discovery'; his premiss was that there *must* be an ultimate and objective grounding for the objective sciences, a grounding which he identifies as the indubitable fact of one's own thinking. We could say that it was Descartes' „will for a universal system of the natural sciences" which hindered him from recognizing the genuine, transcendental character of subjectivity. At the same time, Husserl readily acknowledges the historical merit of Descartes' discovery; as he points out, Descartes' emphasis on the ego was the beginning of a radically new chapter in modern thought which led, through German transcendental philosophy, to Husserlian phenomenology. In Husserlian phenomenology, the *telos* or hidden purpose behind this development comes to the fore: it becomes clear that the meaning of the history of philosophy culminates in the understanding of subjectivity as a realm logically different from what is usually dealt with in the natural sciences. The field of subjectivity, if properly approached, will lead to a revolutionary re-evaluation not only of philosophy itself but also of the whole realm of natural sciences.<sup>20</sup>

#### IV

Now we may ask the question whether Husserl's understanding and criticism of Cartesianism is justified at all. As we have seen, Husserl has a complex understanding of Cartesianism which relies not so much on the tradition of Descartes' philosophy in rationalism and empiricism as rather on Descartes' thought taken in itself. While Husserl clearly relies on all the conceptions of Cartesianism roughly defined above, still, his criticism of Descartes is not entirely just. Husserl, while refusing to consider seriously Descartes' arguments for God's existence, does not see the role of these proofs in the Cartesian system of thought.<sup>21</sup> He does not see that the concept of God plays for Descartes a role similar to what the transcendental ego plays in Husserl's phenomenology – with the difference however that the Cartesian system is logically dualistic, and Husserl's philosophy is rather monistic.<sup>22</sup> When Descartes says that, as quoted above, we have in a way some



knowledge of infinity (of God) prior to our perception of ourselves as finite beings, he refers to a kind of tacit or apriori knowledge which serves as the structural basis of self-knowledge in the sense of an empirical perception, and also in the sense of objective knowledge. Even if Descartes' point is ambiguous and far from being clear and distinct in this respect, some charity in interpretation could have helped Husserl to discover more in Descartes as he in fact did.

Further, we find the famous passage in Descartes' *Meditations* in which he writes that

„je suis, j'existe, est nécessairement vraie, tout les fois que je la prononce, ou que je la conçois en mon esprit”.<sup>23</sup>

In other words, Descartes tends to see the necessity of my own existence in connection to some mental acts; that is, he conceives of the necessity of subjectivity (of „myself”) as an inherent feature of some mental acts. From this thesis it is obvious to conclude that the content of this necessity, that is the feature of subjectivity in the sense of the Husserlian „ownness”, is an inherent feature of any mental act. As Descartes writes, *enfin je suis le même qui sens, c'est-à-dire qui reçoit et connaît les choses comme par les organes des sens, puisqu'en effet je vois la lumière, j'ouïs le bruit, je ressens la chaleur. Mais l'on me dira que ces apparences sont fausses et que je dors. Qu'il soit ainsi: toutefois, à tout le moins, il est très certain qu'il me semble que je vois, que j'ouïs, et que je m'échauffe: et c'est proprement ce qui en moi s'appelle sentir, et cela, pris ainsi précisément, n'est rien autre chose que penser.*<sup>24</sup>

This passage clearly shows that Descartes was conscious of an important mental feature which later became to be termed as intentionality by Franz Brentano.<sup>25</sup> But, precisely, intentionality for Husserl is nothing else than the peculiar function of subjectivity, that is intentionality is not only, and it is not first of all, a „directedness to something” but rather the character that I conceive of something precisely as the content of my own perception.

Finally, we must mention the Cartesian conception of subjectivity. True, Descartes seems to tend to a kind of „Cartesianism” which we may term as the two substance theory of Cartesianism. On the other hand, his position is not so simple as Husserl wants to have it. Recall that, according to Descartes, I perceive myself with stronger evidence than I perceive the objective world. Now, given that Descartes did not possess the necessary conceptual means, we can evaluate this insight as a protoform of what was later to be termed „transcendental”, and what Husserl identifies as his own phenomenological version of transcendental subjectivity. Husserl is right when he points out that there is a logical inconsistency in Descartes' argument of the *cogito ergo sum*: from the fact of my perception of myself perceiving or thinking, I can conclude to my own, empirical existence if and only if I presuppose that empirical existence is implied in any thinking. If however I bracket, as Descartes promise to do, objective existence, then I bracket my own existence

as well. What remains is only a kind of perception of „myself” as perceiving, but surely not myself as existing objectively in an objective world. Husserl’s *epoche* relies precisely on the insight that, by bracketing or suspending the objective world, I suspend the validity of all my beliefs in which I conceive of myself as part of the objective world; yet, by carrying out the act of suspension, I do not stop perceiving myself as myself. The meaning of this „myself” is quite different from the „myself” understood in objective terms: I cannot be part of the external world of objects.<sup>26</sup>

Thus Husserl can be called a true Cartesian in various ways, but especially in relation to his understanding of subjectivity. The subject’s peculiar stance, its relationship to the world of objects had never been addressed so radically and clearly as was done by Descartes. Even if the two substance theory is a misleading formulation of the subject’s unique situation, it cannot conceal the importance of Descartes’ original insight. Husserl, on the other hand, points out very clearly the flaw in Descartes’ argument and develops it into a complex ontology of subjectivity. My task here will only be to consider this ontology from the point of view of its central feature, that of ownness, and to see whether this Husserlian understanding of subjectivity has any relevance in contemporary philosophy of consciousness.

## V

In contemporary philosophy of consciousness<sup>27</sup> we have basically two main trends: the one we may call physicalism, the other, mentalism. Both attempt to offer an explanation of subjectivity. While however physicalism does not consider subjectivity an independent problem but rather a problem of neuronal functioning under the popular title „subjectivity”, mentalism acknowledges that the problem of subjectivity is a problem in its own right. „Subjectivity”, for the mentalist, is not only a name for a physical problem in the brain, but rather a problem which might not be explained in terms of neuronal functions as they are known today.<sup>28</sup> That is to say, most mentalists do not question the possibility of finding an exhaustive explanation of subjectivity; but they are skeptical to the effect that this explanation can be offered on the basis of today’s knowledge of the human brain. Some of them, as for instance Thomas Nagel or Roger Penrose, emphasize that it is strictly impossible to find such an explanation on the basis of today’s science; some others, as for instance John Searle, are satisfied with emphasizing the peculiarity of the problem of subjectivity, and while they define „subjectivity” or „consciousness” as a peculiar quality of brain functions,<sup>29</sup> they do not see the necessity to explain this quality in its own terms.

In my view, the complexity of the problem of consciousness or subjectivity<sup>30</sup> excludes such reductionist solutions as those offered by for instance Daniel Dennett.<sup>31</sup> If we look at a list of the difficulties, we might be more inclined to accept the view that if there is an explanation of consciousness, then this explanation lies outside the scope of today’s science; and if there is an explanation other than the one offered by the dualist John Eccles<sup>32</sup>,

this explanation might at least lead to a reformation of our scientific world-view – as is supposed to be the case by Roger Penrose. In any case, a list of the difficulties at hand may help us to see that Husserl's phenomenology of subjectivity had concentrated on problems of consciousness congenial to the birth of contemporary philosophy of mind. We might also see that the Husserlian ontology of consciousness, and especially its central Cartesian feature, is in many ways relevant to the contemporary discussion on subjectivity.

A list of the problems with subjectivity implies, among others, the following elements: first the fundamental point that subjectivity is a *property* of the functions of the brain; then we have some subproperties of this property: transparence, perspectivity and the present character of consciousness. Other problems are: the problem of the epistemic asymmetry; the problem of the *qualia*, the problem of the unity of consciousness, and so forth. In order to adjust myself to the limits of the present paper, I shall consider in some more detail the first four problems, and I shall mention some aspects of the other problems.<sup>33</sup>

Subjectivity as a property. According to Daniel Dennett, the problem of subjectivity or consciousness is similar to the problem whether the sun in fact goes down on the horizon. As soon as the real situation is discovered, that is the fact that it is the Earth that moves, the problem disappears. Similarly, Dennett believes, as soon as the real, neuronal basis of conscious phenomena are discovered, the problem of „consciousness” dissolves; what remains is only the structure and the functions of the neuronal networks in the brain. The problem with this simile is that while it is true that, with the discovery of the Earth's movement, the fact that the sun goes down proves to be an illusion, still, the phenomenon of our perceiving the sun going down remains. An illusion remains an illusion even if it proves to be an illusion; and if the problem is about the nature of an illusion – that is, the nature of a conscious process – the answer that it is „only an illusion” does not make any sense. As Searle points out,

„you can't disprove the existence of conscious experiences by proving that they are only an appearance disguising the underlying reality, because where consciousness is concerned, the existence of the appearance is the reality.”<sup>34</sup>

You could add that already the fact of „having illusions” about consciousness shows that consciousness is not a simple phenomenon: for having an illusion is already something which should be explained, and which can hardly be explained by reducing consciousness to the physical level. Searle holds, as mentioned above, that consciousness is in fact a property, just as transparence is a property of H<sub>2</sub>O. This insight, basically foreign to a

Cartesianism of the two substances, was already pointed out by Franz Brentano in 1872: inasmuch as he defined intentionality as the property of mental phenomena, he declared that consciousness is a property. For Husserl, similarly, consciousness is a part or a moment of a complex to which there belong physical features as well as purely mental fea-

tures. In the case of the perception of a physical object, what we have, according to Husserl, is a complex whole, a systematic structure, in which we can distinguish among various features: the feature of objectivity (the belief that the „object” exists „there”, outside me), the feature of the object’s being perceived by a subject, by me, the feature that this perception has a number of structural characteristics, it has a time-dimension, a space-dimension, a realm of possible variations and so on. „Consciousness” is only one feature of this whole and, we might add, the *Eigenheitlichkeit* or ownness is also a feature of the object perceived. That is to say, for Husserl there is no „consciousness” outside, as it were, the actual and possible objects of perception; there is no subjectivity existing in itself in an abstract manner. Subjectivity is a fashion or a way in which perception takes place, a way which however proves to be fundamental in the sense that, in any act of perception, it is not consciousness which depends on the „objectively existing object”, but rather the other way round: „objectively existing object” is a feature of the structure of perception. A proof of this, as Husserl holds, is that while we seem to perceive whole objects, in reality we cannot perceive them in their totality; perception of physical objects are always limited to a given point of view.<sup>35</sup>

Once the expression „point of view” is mentioned, one recalls Thomas Nagel’s theory of the „what is it like?”.<sup>36</sup> It is in fact surprising that Nagel has hit the Husserlian nail so much on the head. The point of Nagel’s famous argument is that having a particular point of view is the main characteristic of subjectivity, together with the fact that in principle we can never know what it is like to be something different we actually are: we cannot know what it is like to be a bat. Now for Husserl the feature of *Eigenheitlichkeit* expresses something very similar to Nagel’s „point of view”. While however Nagel insists that any scientific explanation of consciousness has to face this problem, Husserl has his own solution: for Husserl, *Eigenheitlichkeit* is a formal characteristic of consciousness, that is a fundamental term in his ontology of consciousness which should not be confused with a *real* point of view of a *real* object in the *real* (physical) world. As Husserl argues, any real point of view as a basic experience of any subject presupposes that „reality” is not a feature of perception but rather something not dependent on perception. But this view is, precisely, false. On this view, „reality” is a feature of perception, just as consciousness is such a feature too. A real point of view must be understood in terms of Husserl’s systematic approach: forget the „real” character of your point of view, and you will have point of view *ueberhaupt*, as a basic characteristic in a complex of perception, in which „you” as a real subject becomes, so to say, a transcendental subject. Even if this move might surprise you, you will agree that otherwise it is impossible to understand how human perception functions. In other words, Husserl’s approach to the problem of the „point of view” is systematic in the sense that he understands „the point of view” perspective an intrinsic feature of a perceptual whole, and thus of consciousness or subjectivity, and thus escapes of the aporia given in Nagel’s approach. For if we consider all the various real points of view substantially different from one another, we have to face the difficulty that, in spite of all

these differences, we know a lot of the other's point of view: how is this knowledge possible? If it is possible to bridge the gap between two points of view, then it is possible in virtue of a common element in the two, namely their being an intrinsic character of human perception. In other words: if you are able to learn a foreign language, Chinese or Hungarian, it is not because these languages are so much different from the languages you normally know; if you can learn these languages, it is because, as Chomsky suggests, there is a universal grammar inherent in the human mind, a grammar which makes in principle possible to learn and understand *any human language*. Similarly, any real point of view is comprehensible just as a given point of view in virtue of the fact that, besides our own real point of view, we have a „universal”, or „transcendental” point of view in our minds. Husserl had in a way a deeper understanding of this fact than Nagel did.

Transparence, perspectivity and the present character of consciousness. The transparence of consciousness is the expression of the fact that, in any conscious state, one is directly at reality, so to say. That is, in any experience, we perceive the object of experience in a uniquely direct way, in a way which seems to stand in contradiction to the fact that perception runs through a number of intermediary physical–neuronal phases. We do not have any insight into these phases, into the neuronal processes in the brain; what we have is only a direct, clear, homogeneous and unified piece of experience. Husserl's answer to this difficulty is as follows: perception is not a causal process. It is not a process in which one real element physically affects another element which forwards the given impulse to a third element and so on. Rather, perception is a system of motivations in which physical or other objects play the role of motives.<sup>37</sup> A motive is responsible for an initial effect; it is not responsible however for the kind and the structure, that is, for the quality of the effects. A motivation calls for, on Husserl's view, a number of complex reactions in consciousness which are not determined by the initial effect. They are determined, rather, by their own structure or their own way of typical behaviour. To use a simple example: seeing a tree consciously is not so much making a photograph of the tree outside in the street as rather receiving the motivation „tree” and mobilizing all the relevant perceptual structures belonging to the motivation „tree”. In this case, even if I perceive the tree from a certain point of view, it is not that particular point of view which I perceive but rather the tree itself in its totality: I perceive implicitly, for instance, all the parts and sides of the tree which I do not actually see. Transparence, thus, is a feature of being motivated: it is a feature of the structures of consciousness which are directly given; or, to put it in a rather provocative way, the explanation for the transparence of consciousness lies in the fact that what I perceive is above all consciousness itself – motivated always differently, according to the real state of affairs.

The perspectivity of consciousness stands very close to Husserl's view of ownness as a central feature of subjectivity. Perspectivity denotes the fact that, in any perception, perception and the subject of perception is always co-perceived. As Descartes would say, I always perceive my own perception, and I always think of myself, as it were, while think-

ing. In any experience, there is the perspective of the subject of experience who, as Husserl would say, is not a substance standing in isolation from the act of perception. Any experience is subject-bound, and any experience, as mentioned above, is an experience in the fashion of *Eigenheitlichkeit*. While in transparency I perceive an object as immediately given to my perception, and thus as existing so to say objectively as a clear, unified and homogeneous object, in perspectivity I emphasize that this clear and homogeneous object is an object which I perceive – it is an object which is perceived by an I, a subject; I experience that, in the complex of perception, the perspective of subjectivity is an inherent feature.

The present character of consciousness touches upon the time-dimension of experience. In Husserl's phenomenology, the analysis of time in experience plays a crucial role. Husserl's ontology of time-consciousness is so complex and detailed that, for now, I mention only that he does not only analyzes the present character of experience but rather the whole complex in which present, besides past and future, is only one feature. Present is a basic mood of experience, yet it is some structural properties which explain our consciousness of past and future as well. In *retention* I withhold what I experience as present and thus I make place for the past; and in *protention* I prolong the experience of present thus making possible what I experience as future.

I have above defined Husserl's Cartesianism as concentrating on the peculiar nature of consciousness, rejecting however the two substance theory of Descartes. I have pointed out too that, in Descartes' analysis of subjective and objective evidence, he underlines the primacy of subjective evidence by emphasizing its immediate character. We have seen that some elements of this Cartesianism found place in Husserl's phenomenology; and that, in part at least, the same elements have proved to be central to the contemporary analysis of subjectivity. I am of course conscious of the fact that there are many pros and contras to Cartesianism in our discussions on the nature of the mind. Yet it seems to me that a modified form of Cartesianism, a Husserlian Cartesianism is so much in the centre of such discussions that it is impossible not to recall Husserlian insights whenever we touches upon the central problems of subjectivity. This fact has already been recognized by other researchers; let me mention only Barry Smith, Dagfin Foellesdal and David Woodruff Smith. All have analyzed Husserlian themes in connection to contemporary discussions on consciousness, and all are acknowledged as contributing important elements to the debate. I only hope that my own contribution may also serve to clarify that Husserl – far from being a wicked and old-fashioned Cartesian whose philosophy should be substituted by the more up-to-date versions of phenomenology of, say, a Heidegger, a Sartre or a Derrida – was in reality one of the most eminent thinkers in our century whose ontology of consciousness and subjectivity is a rich repository of important insights.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> How there Could Be a Private Language and What It Must Be Like, in: B. Beakley and P. Ludlow, *The Philosophy of Mind*, MIT Press: 1992, pp. 385–391.
- <sup>2</sup> It may be added that, obviously, Cartesianism as a systematic enterprise originates in the Scholastic idea of the *universe of sciences* under the auspices of theological science. Behind this view there lay the conception of a unified world created by the one God.
- <sup>3</sup> Third Meditation, § 45.
- <sup>4</sup> Fifth Meditation, § 65-66.
- <sup>5</sup> Second Meditation, § 33.
- <sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachian Ethics* 1170a.
- <sup>7</sup> The thesis of the primacy of the subjective contradicts Descartes' other statement that I perceive infinity prior to that I can perceive anything (Third Meditation § 45).
- <sup>8</sup> Hua I, § 1.
- <sup>9</sup> *Discourse*, Part Three.
- <sup>10</sup> It is due to this Husserlian view that David Woodruff Smith terms Husserlian philosophy „anomalous monism” (alluding to Davidson's term in *Mental Events*). That is, Husserlian philosophy is a kind of monism in which to any mental event there belongs a physical event and vice versa. For Husserl, mental events and physical events are aspects or moments of the same complex of phenomena. See D. W. Smith, *Mind and Body*, in: W. D. Smith and B. Smith, *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl*, p. 362.
- <sup>11</sup> See Hua I, § 10 and 11.
- <sup>12</sup> To grasp something as something, for Husserl, is to grasp something in its *Eigenheitlichkeit*. *Eigenheitlichkeit* or ownness however is not an objective feature of the content of perception: it is rather a way which is strictly bound to the property of consciousness to see the world in terms of *Eigenheitlichkeit*. That is, any ownness of a given object is, so to say, an aspect of the given perceptual complex which originates not in an „objective” world but rather in the very nature of conscious activity.
- <sup>13</sup> *Idem*, § 31.
- <sup>14</sup> *Idem*, § 20 and 21.
- <sup>15</sup> *Cartesian Meditations*, § 44, § 46.
- <sup>16</sup> *Cartesian Meditations*, § 46.
- <sup>17</sup> For the adverbial theory of perception see Chisholm, *Perceiving: A Philosophical Study*. Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1957. It must be noted that Hector-Neri Castaneda's theory of the guises is also very similar to Husserl's theory of perception. According to Castaneda, self-consciousness (a variation of consciousness) is a type of identity. Every perception implies a structure of identity: we perceive something as something. To every structure of identity there belongs an identical experiencing ego or I. An experiencing I is, according to Castaneda, a synthetic structure of the given experience. a unifying structure which underlies the meaning of the experience. It is, we may say, precisely the identical character of an experience which makes an experience meaningful or identical with itself. Substitute Castaneda's concept of identity with Husserl's *Eigenheitlichkeit* and you'll have a surprisingly similar theory.
- <sup>18</sup> *Cartesian Meditations*, § 10.
- <sup>19</sup> Hua VI, § 18.
- <sup>20</sup> More on this subject matter see in Karl Schuhmann's Introduction to Husserl's *Briefwechsel*, vol. 1.
- <sup>21</sup> Husserl speaks of Descartes' „paradoxical and entirely false proofs for the existence of God”, Hua VI, § 17.

<sup>22</sup> It follows that for Descartes, God (and the soul) is a reality independent of the other kind of existence. If however there is a harmony between the *res extensa* and the *res cogitans*, it is due to God's will. In Husserl, however, transcendental subjectivity is an aspect or moment of a monadic whole. Reality is in no need of a unifying guarantee since its unity is presupposed *ab ovo*; in this point, Castaneda is inconsistent. For he speaks of the plurality of the ephemeral egos without having a unity of the ego – yet he presupposes that we are capable of describing all the various ephemeral egos without any underlying unity, transcendental or real. In contradistinction to Castaneda, Husserl's conception of the absolute ego or – from a different angle – the monadic I is more consistent. See for instance Castaneda's *The Self and the I-Guises*, in: Cramer, Fulda, Horstmann, Pothast (eds), *Theorie der Subjektivität*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1990.

<sup>23</sup> Second Meditation, 19.

<sup>24</sup> Second Meditation, 23.

<sup>25</sup> By 'intentionality' I only mean the Brentanian understanding of the term, and I am not alluding to its pre-Cartesian, Scholastic origins.

<sup>26</sup> I do not address here the problem whether it is possible at all to carry out in reality the Husserlian *epoche*. It seems to me however that this possibility is open, since it implies no logical contradiction.

<sup>27</sup> In this paper, I do not touch upon the problem of the „Cartesian starting point” in the sense of Donald Davidson's criticism. I mention only one point which contains, in a nutshell, an argument against Davidson: you can understand Cartesianism, again, in two senses. First, as what is implied in the empiricist view according to which the main epistemological problem is my own perception; second, in the sense that conscious experience, subjective experience is something unique or peculiar as opposed to the objective scientific view: in subjectivity, you have the problem of the qualia. My analysis of Husserl's Cartesianism presupposes that the problem of subjectivity is no matter of an arbitrary choice of a starting point, but that subjectivity (in subjective experience) is a peculiar kind of entity.

<sup>28</sup> A good summary of these positions can be found in Roger Penrose's *Shadows of the Mind*, Vintage: London 1994, p. 12.

<sup>29</sup> The favourite simile of Searle is this: consciousness or subjectivity is just the kind of quality of the brain as liquidity or transparency is the quality of H<sub>2</sub>O.

<sup>30</sup> In what follows I shall use consciousness and subjectivity as synonyms. It is in fact plausible to believe that there is no consciousness without subjectivity and *vice versa*. I consider subjectivity as the core of consciousness, and I use the term „consciousness” in the sense of subjectivity.

<sup>31</sup> In his *Consciousness Explained*, Little, Brown and Co: Boston 1991.

<sup>32</sup> See for instance his and Popper's *The Self and Its Brain – An Argument for Interactionism*, Springer: New York, 1977.

<sup>33</sup> A good list is presented by Thomas Metzinger in his *Bewusstsein*, Schöningh: Paderborn, 1995. See also Searle's several summaries of the topic, for instance: *The Problem of Consciousness*, in: R. Casati, B. Smith, G. White, *Philosophy and the Cognitive Sciences*, Verlag Holder-Pichler-Tempsky: Vienna 1994.

<sup>34</sup> John R. Searle, *The Mystery of Consciousness*. *The New York Review of Books*, 09. 11. 1995, p. 58.

<sup>35</sup> Nader N. Chokr has attempted to make a comparison between Husserl's phenomenology and Dennett's conception of mind (in *Husserl Studies*, 9: 179-197, 1992). His comparison is rich in good remarks, yet he seems to be too charitable towards Dennett's standpoint.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Nagel, *What is it Like to be a Bat?*, *The Philosophical Review* 83 (1974), 435-450.

<sup>37</sup> See *Ideas II*, § 56.