

## Descartes and the Phenomenological Tradition

The spectre of Descartes figured as a perpetual presence in much of twentieth century philosophy, but nearly always as an emblem for positions to be avoided. Cartesian foundationalism in epistemology, the ontological dualism of mind and body, the associated conception of the mind as a substance, and as a “thing that thinks” – all these have figured in recent philosophy as positions to be refuted or simply renounced, the absurda in one or another reductio argument. But for one prominent twentieth century tradition the story is much more nuanced and complex. Twentieth century phenomenology, which began to stir as a well-defined movement in the last decade of the nineteenth century and has persisted in one form or another into the twenty-first, found in Descartes much more a causa belli than the usual bête noire. As a first approximation we can say that allegiance to Cartesianism divided the phenomenological tradition. Edmund Husserl, who along with Franz Brentano is usually acknowledged as the founder of the phenomenological movement, described Descartes as “the genuine patriarch of phenomenology”; he dubbed his own transcendental phenomenology as “a new, twentieth century Cartesianism”, and insisted that “the only fruitful renaissance is the one which reawakens [Descartes’] Meditations” (Husserl 1929/1964, 3, 5). But Husserl’s most important assistant, Martin Heidegger, rebelled against the Cartesian legacy in modern philosophy, which he saw as the central wrong-turn in modern thought, and as the chief obstacle to a faithful phenomenology and phenomenologically informed ontology. The cogito sum, Heidegger insisted, must be “phenomenologically destroyed” (Heidegger 1927/1962, 123). In Descartes himself Heidegger found “an extreme

counterexample” (Heidegger 1925/1985, 172) and a useful stand-in for his patricidal attacks on Husserl. As we shall see, however, this first approximation must not only be filled out, it must also be qualified and corrected. For as we shall find, Heidegger’s assault on Cartesianism remains in important respects continuous with Husserl’s complex appropriation of it. And Husserlian “neo-Cartesianism,” it turns out, finds itself obliged “to reject nearly all the well-known content of the Cartesian philosophy” (Husserl 1931/1950, 1). Moreover, despite all Heidegger’s hostility toward Descartes and the “Cartesian subject,” he retains at least one fundamental strategy of Cartesian thinking.

Before turning to details, however, we should begin with some kind of clarification of the notion of phenomenology itself. Unfortunately this is a matter which presents some notorious difficulties. Everything about phenomenology – not only its results and methods but its fundamental aims and prospects – has been contested, both within the tradition and outside it. One common characterization casts phenomenology as the philosophical study of the structures of subjective experience, or simply as the study of consciousness. Phenomenology, on this construal, is an attempt to investigate how things appear to us in our conscious experience; it studies the subjective ‘seeming’ of things as opposed to their objective being. It is the study of ‘what it is like’ to be conscious or aware.

But all these characterizations of phenomenology are heavily weighted toward the Husserlian side of the tradition. Heidegger and Heideggerians contest all the concepts we have just employed: consciousness, experience, subjectivity. And indeed part of their complaint is that these concepts are tainted with Cartesian preconceptions. In Being and Time, Heidegger preferred to trace the notion of phenomenology back to its ancient etymological roots: *ta phainomena* (deriving

ultimately from the Greek word for light: *phōs*) and *logos* (discourse, speech, or reason). He then defines phenomenology primarily as a method: “to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself” (Heidegger 1927/1962, 58).

If we look for the common denominator among these formulations we might characterize phenomenology as the study of the ways in which things “come to light” or “show up for us” as the sorts of things that they are. When we look to the range of particular studies within the phenomenological tradition, we see that such an enterprise comes to encompass an enormous range of topics: from Husserl’s account of how the sight of a two-dimensional façade presents itself as one side of a three-dimensional solid, or how one note is experienced as part of a melody, to Heidegger’s account of the structure of the availability of tools, or the authority of others, or the prospect of our own death. In all this both Husserl and Heidegger distinguish quite sharply (though in different ways) between phenomenology and the empirical sciences, including empirical psychology. Where the sciences are concerned to identify and explain the objective natures, motions and mechanisms of things (including human bodies), phenomenology can perhaps better be seen a branch of semantic theory: a study of structures of meaning, although in this case not meaning in language but meaning in conscious experience (Husserl) or in intelligible encounters with things (Heidegger).

#### Husserl’s Cartesianism

Although he discussed Descartes in nearly all the published works of his mature period, in many of his university lectures, and in his *Nachlaß* notes, the main texts pertaining Husserl’s Cartesianism are certainly those associated with his celebrated visit to Paris in the Winter of 1929. The occasion of the visit was an

invitation from the Académie Française to deliver a pair of lectures on the new phenomenology. The event was something of a grand occasion, and a testament to Husserl's growing international reputation at the time. The lectures were delivered at the Sorbonne's, in the Amphithéâtre Descartes; the German Ambassador attended, as did a very young Emmanuel Levinas, who would become a leading figure among a later generation of phenomenologists, as well as an important commentator on Husserl's thought. In retrospect the episode can be seen as an important point of influence of the German philosophical tradition upon the French; as regards the philosophical content of the lectures, however, the direction of influence certainly ran in the other direction. The lectures were advertised under the title "Introduction to Transcendental Phenomenology" and were delivered in German. On his way back to Freiburg from Paris, Husserl prepared an expanded version of the text to be translated for publication in French. The translation was undertaken by Levinas (with assistance from Gabrielle Peiffer) and finally appeared in France in 1931, now bearing the title Méditations cartésiennes. The new title was entirely fitting, as the lectures (both as delivered and as published) were constructed as an elaborate interweaving of Husserl's own thought and the Meditations of Descartes. It is worth noting that this most elaborate and effusive acknowledgement of Descartes came two years after the publication of Being and Time, and may well have been occasioned in part by Heidegger's anti-Cartesian diatribe. The lines of influence and rivalry between Husserl and Heidegger seem to have run in both directions.

How can we best characterize the Cartesianism of Husserl's Cartesian Meditations? One recent scholar has argued that Husserl took only a single idea from Descartes, and that this idea he profoundly altered: "In fact the cogito is the only thing in Descartes that is, according to Husserl, of any philosophical significance at

all (Smith 2003, 12-13).” But while it cannot be denied that Husserl profoundly reshaped the Cartesian legacy he claimed, we should also recognize that his complex borrowing from Descartes extends well beyond his provocative appropriation of the Cartesian cogito. The whole text of the Paris lectures followed a Cartesian form, cast in the first person as a set of meditations – an effect which was magnified in the published edition of the text. The arc of lectures followed the path Descartes had established: from an act of epistemic suspension, through the discovery of the subject, through to a kind of rational rediscovery of an altered world. As Husserl himself puts it, he proceeds “in true Cartesian fashion, [as] philosophers meditating in a radical sense, with, of course, frequent and critical modifications of the older Cartesian meditations” (Husserl 1929/1964, 5). We shall return in due course to consider Husserl’s “frequent and critical modifications”; but first we shall review the Cartesian themes and tropes that make their appearance in the text that follows. It will be useful to distinguish six points.

1. Radical Philosophy and the Crisis of Science: Perhaps the deepest affinity between Husserl and Descartes lies in their common diagnosis of the state of affairs in the contemporary sciences of their respective times. It is well-known that Descartes held that the sciences of his day were in disarray, with much of what passed for scientific knowledge in need of thoroughgoing criticism and repudiation. And it was of course in part this assessment that motivated his call for a radical and far-reaching philosophical response. The existing sciences should be cleared away, with a new and rigorously scientific philosophical inquiry preparing the way for a new and more secure scientific regime. These are radical aims, both in the stance they adopt toward the past and in the role they envision for philosophy in preparing the way forward.

Few in the twentieth century would endorse such immodest aims for philosophy, but Husserl explicitly followed Descartes on this point and shared his outlook. Although the idea of a “Crisis of the European Sciences” became Husserl’s guiding theme mainly in his final published work (Husserl 1936/1970), it had long been his conviction that twentieth century natural science suffered a critical unclarity at its foundations – an unclarity which was increasingly manifest in the fin-de-siècle crises regarding the foundations of logic, mathematics and mathematical physics. But Husserl also perceived a broader crisis of scientific rationality in modern European culture, a crisis of confidence in the ability of rational philosophy and mathematical science to deliver upon its ancient promises. (See e.g., Husserl 1911/1965; compare Weber 1918/2004.) In all this Husserl found a deep affinity with Descartes’s distinctive combination of pessimism and optimism: pessimism about the current state of science, optimism about the unlimited prospects for a reformed science and about the role of philosophy in bringing about that brighter future. But such gains could be achieved, for both thinkers, only by way of a genuinely radical new beginning in philosophy, and it was above all this spirit of radical ambition that Husserl’s Cartesian Meditations sought to appropriate for a new era.

2. A Foundational Philosophy of the Subject: But it was not simply in his radical aims that Husserl found an affinity with Descartes; he also shared a fundamental conviction about how such aims were to be attained. If science were to be put on a secure footing, Descartes held, it must begin with a turn toward the subject. On this point Husserl was in fundamental agreement, although he would fiercely dispute Descartes’s understanding of what such a turn – or indeed such a subject – would amount to. Nonetheless a crucial part of what Husserl sought to appropriate from Descartes was the conviction that a secure foundation for science

and the proper scope for a foundational philosophy was to be found not in God or in Being or in Logic but first and foremost in an investigation of the inquiring subject himself. And in contrast to the anti-foundationalist tenor of later twentieth century epistemology, Husserl followed Descartes in holding that such an investigation – and only such an investigation -- could provide the requisite epistemic foundations upon which a claim to scientific knowledge could be mounted and defended.

The philosopher's quest is for truly scientific knowledge, knowledge for which he can assume ... complete responsibility by using his own absolutely self-evident justifications. I can become a genuine philosopher only by freely choosing to focus my life on this goal.

Once I am thus committed and have accordingly chosen to begin with total poverty and destruction, my first problem is to discover an absolutely secure starting point and rules of procedure, when, in actual fact, I lack any support from the existing disciplines. (Husserl 1929/1964, 4)

These words are Husserl's, speaking at the Sorbonne in 1929; but the thought and the ambitions are unmistakably Cartesian.

3. Methods of Doubt: So how are such grand ambitions to be attained?

Where and how is the meditating philosopher to discover this secure starting point?

Here again Husserl follows a Cartesian lead. The central philosophical tool of Descartes' meditations becomes the central device of Husserl's mature phenomenological method: "We can now let the universal epoché in the sharply defined and novel sense we have given to it step into the place of the Cartesian attempt at universal doubt" (Husserl 1913/1931, §32). For Descartes in the Meditations, the strategy for a radical new beginning in philosophy lies in the method

of radical doubt. If much of what I have trusted as true has shown itself to be false, I will now set aside as false anything which admits of the least doubt. In the progressive implementation of this resolution over the course of his first meditation, Descartes comes to doubt the testimony of his senses, the existence of the world, even the simplest mathematical truths. The world, we might say, is at this point lost – not because it no longer exists, but because the meditating philosopher can make no use of his convictions regarding it. He must find a way forward without relying on them. For Descartes, of course, that way forward is found in the cogito: in the indubitable conviction of the meditator's own existence, and with that existence the domain of thoughts or representations which, though they may be doubted as accurate representations of a mind-independent world, have an indubitable presence as the contents of the doubter's mind.

In this method and in this discovery of subjectivity, Husserl found Descartes's greatest achievement, and the prototype for his own phenomenological procedures. Already in the writings of the 'teens Husserl had introduced the idea of a phenomenological reduction or 'epoché'. As phenomenologists, our interest lies in the presentation of the world in our conscious experience. Prior to the question as to whether our thoughts are true or false there is the question of how our experience manages to bear truth-evaluable content at all. For Husserl, the investigation of this question requires that we very deliberately refocus our attention. In both everyday life and in empirical science our outlook is naïve. We simply take it for granted that our experience presents us with an independent world; our concerns lie in one or another form of trafficking with that world. The distinctive tasks of phenomenological inquiry, however, call for a suspension of this "natural attitude" or "natural naïveté." If we want to know how conscious experience presents us with a



world then we must turn our attention to that experience itself, in order to study the structures which sustain the natural attitude. (On the naïveté of the natural attitude see Husserl 1911/1965, 87.)

In such an endeavor, Husserl holds, we can closely approximate the methodology of Descartes's Meditations. Just as Descartes suspended his usual beliefs in seeking secure epistemic foundations, so Husserl calls for the phenomenological inquirer to "place his beliefs in brackets", to "abstain" from one's convictions, to put all beliefs and theories about the world "out of play." (See, e.g., Husserl 1913/1931, §31; Husserl 1931/1950, 20.) Once he has done so his situation will be much like that of Descartes in his second meditation: he will no longer invoke his customary views about the objective world, whether in the form of everyday common sense convictions or elaborate scientific theories. All such convictions are out of bounds for the meditator, whether Cartesian or Husserlian. And what will come into view at that point is something that, according to both thinkers, is always present but not usually thematized: the thinking I and its domain of meaningful contents. The world is bracketed not simply to insure against error, but to bring into view that domain of consciousness which, according to both, must ultimately serve as the epistemic foundation for all our worldly beliefs.

Here, however, we must mark two crucial differences between the Cartesian prototype and its Husserlian variant; the first pertains to the inner workings of this epistemic suspension, the second to its application in pursuit of philosophical results. In Descartes's Meditations we find two canonical formulations of what we might call the skeptic's resolution or the maxim of the doubter. In his first meditation, Descartes resolves as follows: "So in future I must withhold my assent from these former beliefs just as carefully as I would from obvious falsehoods, if I want to discover any

certainty” (2:15; AT 7:21-22). At the beginning of the Second Meditation the maxim of doubt is cast in these terms: “Anything which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false; and I will proceed in this way until I recognize something certain ... ” (2:16; AT 7:24). In both formulations of the doubter’s maxim we find a common juxtaposition: between “setting a belief aside” and “finding a belief to be false.”

I shall not here undertake an interpretation of this juxtaposition as it figures in Descartes’s argument. (For a subtle discussion see Broughton 2002.) What is crucial for our purposes is to appreciate that for Husserl these two epistemic stances must be sharply distinguished. A first point here is fairly straightforward, and is one that Descartes himself surely appreciated: to treat a belief as plainly false is, pro tanto, to treat its negation as true. Accordingly, if one really seeks to put one’s convictions out of play altogether, then one cannot set them aside in quite the same way as one sets aside a false belief.

But there is a further point to recognize here. For Husserl, unlike Descartes, the chief aim of this act of epistemic suspension is to investigate the phenomenon of believing itself. Husserl wants to know, so to speak, what it is like to have a belief, what the experience of believing (and other intentional states) amounts to. Hence whatever is involved in applying the Husserlian variant on method of doubt, it must not make the act of belief go away altogether; that would be to lose the very thing one seeks to investigate. This is exactly what Husserl means when he talks of “putting my beliefs in brackets.” The phenomenological meditator seeks to leave his beliefs there, but to put them out of play for the purposes of phenomenological investigation. Husserl himself emphasized the difficulty of this distinctive form of mental contortion, and most of his successors ultimately came to the conclusion that it was

impossible. (Several of the surviving photographs of Husserl seem to show him, pen in hand, struggling to carry it off.) What matters here, however, is to appreciate how this subtle difference between the workings of Husserlian epoché and that of Cartesian doubt reflects a deeper underlying divergence in philosophical ambition, despite the many affinities we have emphasized. For Descartes, the point of the method of doubt is to discover some indubitable fact which can then serve as a premise of sorts for securing further knowledge about an extra-mental reality. For Husserl the point of the epoché is to bring into view the contents and acts of consciousness in order to uncover and investigate their distinctive character.

4. The Cogito and Ego: So what is brought into view under the distinctive conditions of meditation recommended by Descartes and Husserl respectively? For Descartes it is first and foremost the meditator's indubitable existence and the immediate contents of his mind. This foundational point in Cartesian philosophy receives a novel formulation in the language of Husserlian phenomenology:

[T]his 'phenomenological epoché' and 'parenthesizing' of the Objective world therefore does not leave us confronting nothing. On the contrary we gain possession of something by it; and what we (or, to speak more precisely, what I, the one who is meditating) acquire by it is my pure living, with all the pure subjective processes making this up, and everything meant in them, purely as meant in them: the universe of 'phenomena' in the ... phenomenological sense. The epoché can also be said to be the radical and universal method by which I apprehend myself purely: as Ego, and with my own pure conscious life ... . (Husserl 1931/1950, 20-21)

For Husserl, then, the phenomenological epoché serves to bring into view phenomena, the objects of investigation in phenomenology. And like Descartes, Husserl holds that with the discovery of these phenomena comes a distinctive form of pure self-discovery. This purity can itself be understood in Cartesian terms. What I discover here is certainly not the existence of myself as a human body in space; for both Descartes and for Husserl any convictions about my body have been ‘set aside.’ Rather, I discover myself as what Husserl calls “the transcendental ego,” as the subject and agent of my experience. We shall return below to consider the sense of the term “transcendental” in this context, and to the fundamental divergence from Descartes that Husserl seeks to mark by that term. But for now we can emphasize the deep symmetry between the course of these two sets of meditations. Indeed on exactly this point Husserl may well have been directly influenced by his study of Descartes. Up until 1901, Husserl had insisted that there was no self to be discovered in experience; but starting with his lectures on Descartes in 1923-24 he came to describe his phenomenological project as an “egology.” (See Husserl 1923/1956.)

5. Clear and Distinct Ideas: In the further elaboration of Descartes’s epistemological project, a crucial role is played by so-called “clear and distinct ideas.” Within the Meditations themselves, the chief epistemic principle is that which maintains – partly on theological grounds – that “whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is true.” In Descartes’s scientific practice, this effectively meant that epistemically warranted scientific claims must be framed mathematically. Husserl certainly does not follow Descartes in all these details. (The theological doctrines of the Meditations are almost certainly part of what Husserl has in mind when he refers to “the content of the Meditations, so strange to us men of today”; Husserl 1931/1950, 3.) Nonetheless he follows Descartes in seeing mathematical idealization

as fundamental to modern science (this is the major theme of the first part of Husserl 1936/1970), and more importantly, he appropriates and redeploys an account of the character and epistemic significance of clear and distinct conception.

For both Descartes and Husserl, the domain of conscious contents revealed under the distinctive conditions of epistemic suspension is to serve as the ultimate epistemic basis for all rigorous scientific knowledge. In part this is because, at the outset of inquiry, this is simply all the evidence the meditator has to go on; in part it is because of the distinctive epistemic security of those contents. For the Cartesian this security derives from the (recently much-contested) immunity from error that pertains to claims about one's own psychological states. If I make a claim about how things are in the world I am vulnerable to error; but if I confine my claims to how things seem to me, or to what I believe about the world, then I insure against such vulnerability. For Husserl, however, the distinctive epistemic authority of our conscious content derives from the characteristic ontological structure of phenomena. At different stages of his career Husserl characterized this ontological structure in different ways, but the core idea remains the same. Unlike ordinary and extraordinary objects of experience (tables and chairs, people and institutions, quarks and black holes), which admit of a contrast between their objective nature and their subjective appearance, phenomena are exhausted by their appearance. There simply is no "being" behind the "seeming"; hence there is no danger that a phenomenon's appearance might mislead us as to its objective nature. Accordingly, if we can only manage to put ourselves in the right frame of mind such that phenomena come into view, we will find ourselves presented with a distinctive object of attention for which apodictic certainty is in principle possible. They are, as Husserl puts it, capable of being given with absolute evidence.

[W]e meditators, while completely destitute of all scientific knowledge, must have access to evidences that already bear the stamp of fitness for such a function, in that they are recognizable as preceding all other imaginable evidences. Moreover, in respect of this evidence of preceding, they must have a certain perfection, they must carry with them an absolute certainty. (Husserl 1931/1950, 14)

To be sure, various kinds of error will still be possible in phenomenology, particularly if we allow our prejudices and preconceptions about the mind to replace stringent phenomenological observations. There will also be a host of special difficulties and dangers that present themselves when we try to find words (logoi) to describe our phenomena. Ordinary discourse may be well-suited for the mundane business of describing things that are (beings), but it may prove quite misleading when used for the ultramundane business of phenomenological description. But while the phenomenologist cannot for these reasons claim absolute immunity from error, he can, according to Husserl, justifiably claim to have found a domain of description distinctively suited to apodictic certainty.

6. The Return of the World: The epistemic cycle of Descartes's Meditations closes with the recovery of what had been lost. What in the First Meditation had been dispatched through the discipline of radical doubt is returned as an object of either actual or possible knowledge. But what is returned is also transformed. I know myself, not as a body in space but as a hybrid of a thinking mind and an extended body; I know God, not as a figure from a revealed religion, but under the rational characteristics of first cause and most perfect being. And I know the material world, not as so many objects of a sensory show, but as res extensa, cognizable by a geometrical physics.

In Husserl too the world is returned and transformed. But there is a crucial difference. For the purposes of phenomenological inquiry, the recovery of the world is not so much recovery of knowledge about the world as it is reconstruction of the principles under which a knowable world is available for us as an object of experience. Unlike Descartes, Husserl is not aiming to establish specific knowledge claims about an objective, mind-independent world. In this sense, the epoché remains in effect right through to the end of Husserl's inquiries: qua phenomenologist, he remains agnostic about the objective traits of worldly entities. What he seeks to recover is the world as an object of experience. That is, he seeks to exhibit how it is that, starting from the immediate deliverances of conscious experience, as described under the phenomenological reduction, we come to have experience of an enduring, three-dimensional world of natural entities with objective properties. In the Paris lectures and the Cartesian Meditations Husserl offers only the briefest sketch of this 'recovery,' though in other texts it is elaborated at much greater length. Considering in turn our experience of a hexahedron, a melody, and of Others (i.e., other subjects of experience), he sets out to articulate the complex processes of anticipation and fulfillment, or "horizontal adumbration" whereby the immediately given contents of consciousness are synthesized as experiences of entities of these distinctive kinds. But the point of these phenomenological exercises is not, as in the Cartesian epistemological tradition, to refute the skeptic or the solipsist. Rather, Husserl aims to exhibit what we might call 'the logic of consciousness': the formal structures whereby elements of conscious experience combine to represent complex objective totalities.

Already in this survey of Husserl's loans and debts we have begun to see a number of departures from his Cartesian model. But in addition to these points of

divergence Husserl also offers a series of increasingly trenchant criticisms. Indeed almost every passage celebrating Descartes's accomplishments also incorporates unmistakable indicators of this critical dimension of his appropriation. The Cartesian method of doubt promises a radical ground for philosophy, but only "if made in the right manner"; Descartes had the will to free himself radically from assumptions, but "scholasticism lies hidden, as unclarified prejudice, in [his] Meditations" (Husserl 1931/1950, 18, 23-24). The criticisms become rather more systematic and explicit in the published Meditations than they were in the original lectures, but even for his Parisian audience, Husserl did not mask or soften his critique:

In these matters Descartes was deficient. It so happens that he stands before the greatest of all discoveries – in a sense he has already made it – yet fails to see its true significance, that of transcendental subjectivity. He does not pass through the gateway that leads into genuine transcendental philosophy. (Husserl 1929/1964, 9)

As this last passage already indicates, Husserl's most pointed and important criticisms of Descartes pertain to his understanding of the thinking ego, the "subjectivity" that Husserl credits Descartes with having discovered. The issues here are complex and fiercely disputed; for our purposes I shall simply try to indicate the two most fundamental points. Husserl's first critical point is in effect his adaptation of a longstanding German tradition which criticizes the so-called "reification of the subject." (Related criticisms can be found in Kant, Fichte, Schopenhauer and Dilthey, among many others.) Having identified the I or ego as his indubitable starting point, Descartes famously goes on to characterize it as "a thing that thinks," as "res cogitans." Husserl complains that this is a fundamental misstep. If the method of epistemic suspension is strictly carried through, then any claims about things should



properly be held in abeyance; the meditator should confine himself to the description of phenomena. But to treat the I as a res (and then as substance) is to treat it as something with an objective nature transcending its appearance. As Husserl sees it, Descartes mistakenly thinks he has discovered “a little tag-end of the world”, and that the remaining task is “to infer the rest of the world by rightly conducted arguments, according to principles innate in the ego” (Husserl 1931/1950, 24). In Paris it was this point that took Husserl’s rhetoric to its most impassioned heights:

Here we have reached a dangerous point. It seems simple to understand the pure ego with its cogitations by following Descartes. And yet it is as if we were on the brink of a precipice, where the ability to step calmly and surely decides between philosophic life and philosophic death. ... We must under no circumstances take it as self-evident that, with our apodictic and pure ego, we have salvaged a small corner of the world as the single indubitable fact about the world which can be utilized by the philosophizing ego. Unfortunately, Descartes commits this error, in the apparently insignificant yet fateful transformation of the ego to a substantia cogitans, ... which then becomes the point of departure for conclusions by means of the principle of causality. In short, this is the transformation which made Descartes the father of the rather absurd transcendental realism.

(Husserl 1929/1964, 8-9, trans. alt.).

We cannot here undertake to unpack and assess the full complexities of Husserl’s allegations. But the most important point is his claim that, once the epoché has been thoroughly carried through, the ego that we discover is not an empirical ego, not even the ego of a particular individual; indeed it is not properly speaking a part of

the world at all. It is what Husserl, following Kant, calls “the transcendental ego,” the formal agency at work in experience, synthesizing phenomena to produce (or ‘constitute’) the experience of a particular embodied psychological subject presented with an enduring objective world. It is, we might say, thinking, rather than a thing that thinks. Or to use Husserl’s preferred formulation (and characteristic technical prose): it is “the validation-ground of all Objective validations and grounds [Geltungsgrund aller objektiven Geltungen und Gründe]” (Husserl 1931/1950, 26; trans. alt.).

Husserl’s second point of criticism is closely related. Descartes, Husserl complains, has not only mistaken the ontological character of the ego he has discovered, he has also overlooked the basic formal structure of its thoughts.

[Descartes] neglected to describe the ego in the full concretion of its transcendental being and life, nor did he regard it as an unlimited work-project to be pursued systematically. [Had he pursued this project he would have discovered that] the expression ego cogito must be expanded by one term. Every cogito contains a meaning, its cogitatum. ... Consciousness is always consciousness of something.

... The guiding schema for our exposition and description is [accordingly] a three-sided concept: ego cogito cogitatum. (Husserl 1929/1964, 12-14)

Here we encounter Husserl’s distinctive notion of intentionality, or the intentional character of consciousness, thought, and experience. To say of some conscious state that it is intentional is to say that its identity is fixed in part by its object – that which it is consciousness of. A belief is always a belief about something, likewise desire, hope, fear, longing, etc., all have some object or state-of-affairs toward which they are

directed. The identity of an intentional state is fixed in part by this object: my belief is the belief that it is in part in virtue of what it is a belief about. Brentano had famously used intentionality as the defining characteristic of mental or psychological phenomena; for Husserl it was the central theme and puzzle of phenomenological inquiry. (On Brentano's thesis see Brentano 1874/1973, 88-89; for an influential modern articulation of Brentano's claim see Chisholm 1957. On intentionality as the "first riddle" of phenomenology see Husserl 1911/1965, 87.)

Husserl's complaint against Descartes, then, is that he neglects or overlooks the phenomenon of intentionality. To every 'I think' (cogito) there belongs a 'something thought' (cogitatum), as its intrinsic accusative. Granted, Descartes distinguishes between the formal and objective reality of an idea, most famously in the Third Meditation in arguing for the existence of God. But he fails to consider what consciousness is such that it manifests this distinctive intentional structure. Had he done so he might have made the discovery that was left for the later tradition, namely that objects of experience are not simply there for the subject, but must be constructed or constituted as such.

The conceptual fixation of an intentional object-class leads, in intentional researches, as one soon recognizes, to an organization or order. In other words, transcendental subjectivity is not a chaos of intentional experiences, but it is a unity through synthesis. It is a many-leveled synthesis in which always new classes and individuals are constituted. However every object expresses a rule structured within transcendental subjectivity. (Husserl 1929/1964, 21)

It is only through the constituting agency of the transcendental ego that consciousness bears the determinate intentional content that makes it fit for truth-evaluation and

hence even a possible candidate for error. And it is only as correlates of such constituting synthesis that objects are available as truth-makers for our thoughts. Descartes, Husserl complains, was a realist; but had he attended to the intentional character of the subjective consciousness he uncovered, he would have discovered the truth of transcendental idealism.

### Heidegger's Ontological Critique

Already before Husserl traveled to Paris, Heidegger had developed a much more radical phenomenological critique of Cartesianism, inaugurating an engagement with Cartesian thought that extended through much of his career. (For a survey of Heidegger's writings about Descartes, see Marion 1996; for an early statement of Heidegger's critique of Descartes see Heidegger 1925/1985, 171-185.) For our purposes here I shall focus on the writings immediately surrounding the publication of Heidegger's magnum opus, Being and Time (Heidegger 1927/1962). In this context it is important to note that the published portion of Being and Time was a substantial fragment of an intended larger whole. We know from the published text that Heidegger planned to include a systematic critical engagement with Descartes as part of his projected Third Division. But the work was left uncompleted, and we are left to reconstruct the analysis from Heidegger's published outline, and from various discussions of Descartes incorporated both in the published writings and in the lecture courses. (For Heidegger's outline of Division III as it pertains to Descartes see Heidegger 1927/1962, 133.)

From the outset of his mature writings, Heidegger framed his phenomenological investigations in an ontological register. Ontology, as Heidegger conceives it, is the study of being – or, as he sometimes puts it, of “the meaning of being” or of “the being of entities.” Two of Heidegger's most fundamental

distinctions can already be seen in play here. The first is the so-called “principle of ontological difference,” the thesis that being is not itself a being; it is not, so to speak, one more entity among the various things that are. Second, Heidegger distinguishes between two kinds of investigation or ‘science.’ Ontic sciences investigate one or another kind of being or entity (biology investigates living entities, geology investigates the earth, etc.); ontology, by contrast, concerns itself not with beings (or entities, die Seienden; literally: the things that are) but rather with the being of those entities, with what it is or means to be. (See, e.g., Heidegger 1927/1982, 11-19.) For anyone unfamiliar with Heidegger’s idiosyncratic (and seductive) patterns of thought, all this will have something of the air of an incantation. But it comes to have quite a direct and indeed exemplary application in Heidegger’s ontological critique of Descartes. In what follows I elicit the main outlines of Heidegger’s account, focusing on three main points.

1. The Phenomenological Inadequacy of Subject-Object Ontology. Like many of Descartes’s twentieth century critics, Heidegger attacked the dualism which figured centrally both in Descartes’s metaphysical doctrines and in his philosophical legacy. But whereas others attack the dualism of mind and body, Heidegger’s focus is rather on the dualism of mind and world, together with the closely related dualisms of subjective and objective, res cogitans and res extensa, and the powerful metaphorical contrast between a private, mental ‘inner’ realm and a public, physical ‘outer’ one. In short it is not the mind-body contrast per se that troubles Heidegger, but a conception of being: an ontological criterion according to which everything that is must be assigned to one or the other of these two ways of being.

So what is wrong with this ontological dualism? Once again here we must take care not to assimilate Heidegger’s criticism too closely to those found in more

traditional metaphysics and philosophy of mind. For Heidegger's complaint about Cartesian dualistic ontology is not that it creates insuperable problems over the interaction of mind and brain, nor that it relies on an extravagant metaphysics of 'spiritual substance.' Indeed Heidegger is wholly silent over these more familiar anti-Cartesian objections. Rather, his complaint is, in the first instance, that the Cartesian ontological framework is phenomenologically inadequate.

Here as in many instances, Heidegger draws on a Husserlian line of argument which he then radicalizes and turns against Husserl himself. As we have already had occasion to note, Husserl himself had made the study of intentionality central to phenomenological investigation. Here it is significant to remember that Brentano had introduced the notion of intentionality specifically as a device for distinguishing mental or psychological states from material or physical ones. That is, Brentano deployed the notion of intentionality specifically in order to mark a version of the Cartesian ontological divide. Husserl had argued, however, that the phenomenological structure of intentionality must remain mysterious so long as one confines oneself to these two familiar ontological categories. The crucial difficulty here is the problem of accommodating the intentional object (i.e., the object of an intentional state, that which it is 'of or about') within the constraints of Cartesian ontology.

The issues here closely mirror the debates about empty reference which figured so prominently among the founding figures of analytical philosophy of language, albeit in this case in connection with the intentional structure of experience rather than the referential function of language. Imagine a group of Conquistadors sitting around the campfire wondering where to find El Dorado. Here we have a case of intentional experience; their wonder is clearly wonder of or about something. But

what should we say that their wonder is directed toward? What is its intentional object? If we confine ourselves to the usual ontological alternatives then we seem forced to say that it is either an ‘outer’ physical item in the world or an ‘inner’ psychological state in their minds. But neither option seems apt. El Dorado does not and never did exist, so it seems clear that the object of their intentional wonder is not any material ‘outer’ object. Yet it would be a very bizarre distortion of the case to say that their wonder concerned the location of some mental item; their concern was to find the city of gold, not a mental representation of it!

This problem was to exercise the phenomenological tradition through several generations. Brentano at one point seemed to embrace (though he subsequently abandoned) the second horn of the dilemma, insisting that the object of an intentional state ‘in-exists’ within the psychological state (Brentano 1874/1973, 88). Husserl’s solution was to expand the usual subject-object ontology, in a strategy closely analogous to the appeal to the “third realm” in Lotze and Frege. (For an influential discussion see Føllesdal 1969; for a critique see Dummett 1993. For an attempt to accommodate non-referring intentional states within subject-object ontology see Searle 1983.) But Heidegger resorted to a much more radical position. Criticizing both the “erroneous objectivizing” and the “erroneous subjectivizing” of intentionality, and ridiculing the appeal to a third realm as “no less doubtful than medieval speculation about angels” (Heidegger 1927/1982, 65, 215), Heidegger proposes instead that whole ontological framework of inner mind and outer world be abandoned.

Because the usual separation between a subject with its immanent sphere and an object with its transcendent sphere – because, in general, the distinction between an inner and an outer sphere is constructive and

continually gives occasion for further constructions, we shall in the future no longer speak of a subject, of a subjective sphere, ... . The idea of a subject which has intentional experiences merely inside its own sphere and is not yet outside it is an absurdity which misconstrues the basic ontological structure of the being that we ourselves are.

(Heidegger 1927/1982, 64)

We shall return presently to consider Heidegger's alternative ontological analysis of 'the being that we ourselves are'. But it is first worth emphasizing a point upon which Heidegger himself insists. We must recognize that superceding the ontology of subject and object will require not just a change in our language but a substantial change in the patterns of our thought. The Cartesian legacy in ontology has profoundly shaped the ways in which we think about ourselves and about the world in which we find ourselves, as also our sense of the problems which we think worth pursuing within philosophy. If, to take one central example, the problematic of skepticism is framed as the problem of transcending our inner experiences in order to gain knowledge of an accordingly 'external world,' then giving up the ontology of mind and world will mean abandoning the problem of skepticism. Heidegger: "The 'scandal of philosophy' is not that this proof [that we can have knowledge of an external world] has yet to be given, but that such proofs are expected and attempted again and again. Such expectations, aims and demands arise from an ontologically inadequate way of starting ... ." (Heidegger 1927/1962, 249).

2. Descartes's Neglect of Ontology: Heidegger's very first claim in Being and Time concerns the neglect of ontology: "The question of being has today been forgotten" (Heidegger 1927/1962, 21). And for Heidegger no single thinker more clearly exemplifies this lamentable forgetting than Descartes. At first (and perhaps



second) glance this is a rather bizarre claim. After all, much of Descartes's thought seems to be focused on clarifying different modes of being and determining their essential traits. Yet at a deeper level, Heidegger argues, Descartes's attention to metaphysics betrays a neglect of ontology. He presses this objection in connection with two specific doctrines of Cartesian philosophy. The first pertains to Descartes's implicit handling of ontological problems in the Principles of Philosophy. We there find Descartes drawing a variety of ontological distinctions -- in particular, distinctions among the varieties of substance. His most celebrated distinction is of course between mental substance as res cogitans and physical substance as res extensa. But he also there distinguishes between divine and created substance, i.e., between God and his various creatures. Given these distinctions, it is natural to ask what these different substances all share in common. For Heidegger this is the crucial question. If the basic notion in one's ontology is the notion of substance, then the question of fundamental ontology is this: what is it to be a substance? Descartes's official answer is that a substance is something that exists so as to depend on no other thing for its existence. But he frankly admits that this definition cannot be applied uniformly across the distinction between divine and created substance, since all created substances depend upon divine substance for their existence. Descartes's surprising conclusion is that his basic ontological term harbors an ineliminable ambiguity.

Hence the term 'substance' does not apply univocally, as they say in the Schools, to God and to other things; that is, there is no intelligible meaning of the term which is common to God and his creatures. (1:210, AT 8:24)

For Heidegger this concession marks Descartes's refusal of the ontological question, a refusal to get to the bottom of the meaning of 'substance,' and hence ultimately an evasion of fundamental ontology. Heidegger: "This evasion is tantamount to his failing to discuss the meaning of being which the idea of substantiality embraces" (Heidegger 1927/1962, 126).

Descartes's failure to confront the question of being is most consequential, Heidegger claims, in the case of his treatment of what Heidegger calls "the being that we ourselves are." Descartes's most famous and fundamental philosophical result of course concerns his own existence or being (his 'sum'). As Heidegger sees it, however, Descartes's focus on the distinctive epistemic authority of self-knowledge, and on the nature of the thinking which secures it, comes at the expense of sufficient attention to the distinctive being of the entity whose existence he asserts.

Historiologically, the aim of the existential analytic can be made plainer by considering Descartes, who is credited with providing the point of departure for modern philosophical inquiry by his discovery of the 'cogito sum.' He investigates the 'cogitare' of the 'ego,' at least within certain limits. On the other hand, he leaves the 'sum' completely undiscussed, even though it is regarded as no less primordial than the cogito. (Heidegger 1927/1962, 71)

On just this crucial point, Heidegger alleges, Descartes's radical stance toward the metaphysical tradition deserts him. Failing to attend to the sum – to the distinctive mode of being of the ego – Descartes unthinkingly and uncritically adopts the ontological category (substance) that he had inherited from that tradition. For Heidegger, however, this very neglect points the way toward an "existential analytic"

the central positive project in Being and Time. Let us grant the Cartesian result: I am, I exist. So what exactly does it mean for something like me to be?

3. A Phenomenologically Informed Alternative: It falls well beyond the scope of these remarks to enter into an analysis of Heidegger's ontological alternative to Cartesianism. But we are at least in a position to sketch a few of Heidegger's decisive steps, particularly as they emerge out of his repudiation of Cartesian ontology and the Husserlian phenomenological approach which, he claims, failed to supercede it. The first point here concerns the mode of being of 'the kind of being that we ourselves are.' In place of the Cartesian conception of a thinking substance, or a hybrid of thinking mind and extended body, Heidegger proposes his account of 'Dasein,' whose mode of being he dubs simply 'existence' or 'being-in-the-world.' These are all complex technical terms in Heideggerian phenomenology; the crucial point here is the way Heidegger deploys them in pursuit of the undertaking that Descartes neglected. If we seek a phenomenologically grounded account of our own distinctive mode of being, one which genuinely answers to the way in which we show up for ourselves as the kind of beings that we are, then we will find ourselves not as 'thinking things' contemplating a world from which we are in truth detached, but rather as active beings, engaged with entities we encounter proximally around us in a world we share with them. These entities in turn we do not encounter as substances – self-contained and self-sufficient bearers of objective-properties – but as what Heidegger calls 'beings-ready-to-hand,' entities whose character and salient features manifest themselves only in their relations to other entities, and ultimately to the broader teleological context in which they figure. The locus of intentionality will no longer be found in conscious states, as Brentano and Husserl assumed, but in what Heidegger calls 'comportment' – in the ways in which we skillfully and

comprehendingly use things, 'holding ourselves toward them.' All this in turn presupposes the sort of context in which such entities can make their appearance – what Heidegger calls simply 'world.' The world, phenomenologically understood, is not a totality of entities or abstract forces, nor is it to be understood as the geometrical space in which decontextualized entities have their location. Rather it is the systematic temporal structure of meaningful contexts in which we enjoy our distinctive mode of being, existing alongside entities and among others, anxiously projected into a approaching future which includes our own inevitable death. (For an influential accounting of these Heideggerian themes see Dreyfus 1991.)

In all this we have come a long way from Descartes's conception of the thinking I, as also from Husserl's account of the pure transcendental ego. But at the same time we can still recognize the continued authority of one fundamental Cartesian conviction: any adequate philosophy, for Heidegger and Husserl as much as for Descartes himself, must find its orientation and ground in a sustained philosophical self-interrogation.

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