

Phenomenological Interpretation of Descartes

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ABSTRACT

Phenomenology questions the basic foundations of Modernity. In particular, it challenges Descartes' attempt to found the scientific method with absolute certainty. Phenomenology is defined by the work of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. Even though each of them developed their own way within Phenomenology, their theories are determined by a critique of the Cartesian method. For them, Descartes' text at issue is "Meditations on First Philosophy". The objective of this paper is to show an alternative interpretation of Descartes to the one that has shaped Modernity. In order to do this, it is necessary to show Phenomenology's main critique of Descartes and also show how it arises from Descartes' "Meditations", one, two, three, four, and six.

INTRODUCTION

Modernity is defined by the Cartesian idea "I think, I am". In writing this, Descartes has made "being" the same as "thinking". Existence is understood in an act of pure intuition – that which is certain and indubitable. It is known intellectually. It is from here that Descartes believes he is able to ground science in absolute certainty and also come to know the truth of the world. All truth is apprehended through his pure intuition. The truth of the world is in the mind, not the world itself. It is this basic foundation of Modernity that Phenomenology questions and grows out of. Phenomenology is defined by the works of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty and although each of them has their own methodologies in Phenomenology, their works are determined by a critique of Descartes' ideas. By exploring their critiques and showing how Phenomenology itself arises out of Descartes' *Meditations*¹, an alternative interpretation of Descartes will come to light; one that is different from the one that has shaped Modernity.

Husserl's Critiques of Descartes

In the introduction and the first meditation of Husserl's work, *Cartesian Meditations*², he discusses where Descartes and the Cartesian doctrine went astray, concluding that Descartes was not able to turn his doctrine into a genuine transcendental philosophy. Husserl interprets Descartes and his methodology in the *Meditations* to prove his failure in this endeavor. First it will be necessary to look at how Husserl sees Descartes' work and the criticisms that emerge from it, and then, for comparison, a brief overview of Husserl's beginning methodology.

As a beginning philosopher, one must reject, like Descartes did in his beginnings, all ideas that seem to be self-evident or obvious in our everyday experience. This will include for Husserl all Cartesian ideas as well because these are, in his time, taken to be self-evident. Even though Husserl rejects the Cartesian philosophy, his aim and starting point are the same; to reform philosophy by turning into the self and overthrowing and building an all new science that is grounded on an absolute foundation. Furthermore, since all sciences are part of philosophy; or so Descartes believes, they too will become genuine sciences. Any beginning philosopher must use Descartes as a prototype and start his or her meditation in absolute poverty with absolute lack of knowledge and try to find a method that leads to a genuine science.³

Descartes turns to the self by regressing into the philosophizing ego, or "the ego as subject of his pure *cogitationes*"⁴. He regresses by using his method of doubt. Descartes doubts everything that seems to be certain in his natural attitude. Anything that has survived this method; he will consider to be absolutely certain. Sense experience, the world given as everyday experience, including a being of the world, does not survive this method at this initial stage. The only thing that survives for Descartes is a pure ego of his *cogitationes*, because only this he has come to find has an absolutely indubitable existence. This ego is considered to be the *cogito*; I think; I am. Descartes considers this indubitable because in saying phrases such as, "I think" or even "I doubt", there must be a being that is doing the thinking or the doubting. It would be a contraction to say, "I doubt that I exist" because you must exist

in order to doubt. It is through this ego and its “innate” guiding principles, that an Objective world can be deduced; first by deducing God’s existence and reality and then through that an Objective world; which includes the sciences.⁵ Husserl questions if Descartes thoughts are worth investigating since they may not pertain to the times he is living in now.

He realizes that those sciences that are meant to be grounded in absolute certainty by the *Meditations* have paid very little attention to them. Through the last three centuries, the sciences are finding themselves with obscurities in their very foundations. Nevertheless, in regressing back to the pure ego, Descartes had come up with a new kind of philosophy, which is striving towards a final form where it’s true self may be disclosed in a genuine science. In the end Descartes was not able to unify philosophy as a science. According to Husserl, this failure can be seen in present-day Western philosophies:

Instead of a unitary living philosophy, we have a philosophical literature growing beyond all bounds and almost without coherence... We have philosophical congresses [where] philosophers meet but, unfortunately, not the philosophies. The philosophies lack a mental space in which they might exist for and act on one another.⁶

Descartes was unable to create this mental space of a unifying philosophy. It is because of this that Husserl finds himself in the same situation of a young Descartes; he needs to renew the radicalness of a beginning philosopher. He does not adopt the content of a Cartesian philosophy to do this, but by not adopting it, he will be able to reawaken the radical spirit; a spirit of self-responsibility that Descartes’ *Meditations* have lost. Husserl must clarify and avoid the presuppositions that underlie Descartes’ work to be sure his meditation does not lose its’ spirit as well, and therefore may be able to achieve a genuine science.⁷

Husserl starts his clarification with Descartes’ presupposed idea that there can even be an ideal science, one of which is grounded absolutely. Husserl interprets that Descartes believes an all embracing science is in the form of a deductive argument; that which rests on an indubitable and self-evident foundation. In this idea, he has also presupposed the form that the ideal science would be, and that it is part of the system of Logic. Moreover, Descartes takes as a self-evident truth that the ego is absolutely certain of himself and is indubitable and therefore the principles that are innate in himself as an ego are certain and indubitable as well. Since these self-evident principles are all derived from the innate idea of God, they are what ground all knowledge for Descartes.⁸ Descartes has therefore presupposed what is meant to be the foundations for a science grounded in absolute certainty, thus making it impossible to ever achieve his goal of an ideal science. Husserl has shown that these presuppositions have formed the *Meditations* themselves and since the Cartesian ideals have been so influential in Western philosophy that these presuppositions have also determined other philosophies for centuries.⁹

Descartes had a radical will to free himself from prejudices, but unfortunately, according to Husserl, Scholasticism lies hidden and not clarified. This has lead Descartes into approving the prejudices of mathematics and a natural science; that which he wanted to originally doubt. Descartes acts as if he has saved a piece of the world, the ego, which then derives the rest of the world from its own innate principles.¹⁰ Husserl believes that it was in accepting these prejudices that Descartes went astray from his ultimate goal and was never able to reach the transcendental level.

It is necessary to briefly go over Husserl’s methodology in order to see where he branches off from what he understands to be Descartes’ ideas. Mainly, Husserl does not accept these prejudices that he believes underlie the *Meditations*. Anything that is to be accepted in his meditation as certain and indubitable must be produced by him as a new science and he must stay true to this idea if he is ever able to actualize the possibility of it. Husserl cannot presuppose that there is an ideal science like Descartes did; instead he uses the general idea of science and philosophy that is given factually as a necessary presumption to cautiously guide his meditation. It is through immersion that the ideal becomes clarified, “...if we immerse ourselves progressively in the characteristic intention of scientific endeavor, the constitute parts of the general final idea, genuine science, become explicated for us...”¹¹ Husserl keeps in mind how the idea might be thought out as a possibility and thus he is able to consider whether or not it might be actualized.¹²

Starting his methodology with an idea of general science is much different from Descartes starting his methodology with the idea of an ideal genuine science. Husserl is careful not to presuppose that there is a genuine science that will work as a foundation for grounding all sciences because this presupposition is a prejudice. If he were to believe in an ideal science, then he is allowing the prejudice of a science grounded in truth to underlie his methodology. Descartes, believing in this ideal science, has unwittingly allowed the prejudice to be the foundation for his methodology; and having a prejudice as the foundation hinders Descartes ability to reach a transcendental level.

For Husserl a way to immerse ourselves in this scientific endeavor and in the world is through judgments. When we judge something we presuppose that it exists; “That *is* a table”, but more importantly we intend its meaning. It is

when we ground these judgments through our engagement with the world, i.e. putting a glass on the table, than we have fulfilled our intended meaning. The fulfillment of intended meaning is evidence. Husserl explains evidence as, “an ‘experiencing’ of something that is, and is thus; it is precisely a mental seeing of something itself.”¹³ We experience the table and through this experience we are conscious that it is a table.

Perfect evidence or pure and genuine truth is shown as ideas in our striving to fulfill our intentions. When we immerse ourselves in striving for fulfillment, we are able to obtain genuine truth. This truth leads us to understand the components of genuine science, “...by immersing ourselves meditatively in the general intention of scientific endeavor, we discover fundamental parts of the final idea, genuine science, which, though vague at first, governs that striving.”¹⁴ So as immersion brings forth these essential parts, we find that the parts are what lead us to strive to fulfill our intentions. If we did not strive to fill our intended meanings then we would not consciously engage with the world. Descartes started his methodology with the foundation of apodictic or supremely evident truth to ground all sciences. Husserl on the other hand starts his with intentionality and therefore grounds all sciences in it; apodictic truth is part of that foundation. The evidence that is apodictic and grounded in our intentions is what grounds a good starting philosophy. This is Husserl’s foundation for his methodology.

This evidence for Husserl must be absolutely certain and absolutely indubitable. Also it must disclose through itself its’ absolute inconceivability or that it is impossible to conceive of its’ non-being, and have insight that it is first in itself, that nothing comes before it. The existing world seems obvious to be this type of evidence, but because of this obviousness and for the fact it is possible to conceive of the world as a non-being; for example a coherent dream; he must deny the acceptance of the experiential world as apodictic¹⁵. The world for him only *claims* to be something. Furthermore he must group into the experiential world other Egos because these also seem as a matter of fact and are not first in themselves; they come after the “world”. Husserl does not know whether or not the world exists, but that does not matter. For the world; existing or not, is here for him, as itself, that he already always is in. The only difference for Husserl, is as a philosophizing Ego, he no longer accepts the world or for that matter other objects and Egos as existing, but only as “mere” phenomenon.¹⁶ Since these objects cannot be apodictic, he “parenthesizes” or puts them off to the side in order to see what is left.

Husserl terms this “parenthesizing” the epoché. His epoché is different from Descartes method of doubt in a fundamental way. When Descartes doubts something, he then believes it does not exist. For example, when he doubts things he perceives, he believes these things are non-existent. Husserl on the other hand is indifferent to the existence of those things he puts in his epoché. It does not matter if these things exist or not, because no matter what, they are already here for him in a world.

The epoché does not leave Husserl with nothing, but in fact he gains his pure living or in other terms the intentional structure of the mind. Here he is conscious of the world in which he already is in. “If I put myself above all this life and refrain from doing any believing that takes ‘the’ world straightforwardly as existing—if I direct my regard exclusively to this life itself, as consciousness of ‘the’ world—I thereby acquire myself as the pure ego.”¹⁷ This is where Husserl is able to apprehend himself completely as a pure Ego and thus the world in which he perceives and experiences as a conscious being is the natural everyday world. This world is secondary and presupposes the transcendental being. The epoché is the radical method in which he is able to apprehend himself purely; as Ego in his own pure life in which the entire “world” exists for him as it is.¹⁸ The world is left as intended for him after this radical method. The existence of the world does not matter for Husserl; like it does for Descartes, because it is simply there as his fulfillment of intentions.

Heidegger’s Critiques of Descartes

Heidegger continues the critique of Descartes in two of his works, *Being and Time*¹⁹ and *History of the Concept of Time*²⁰. He shows through Descartes’ ontology, that ontological traditions replace the phenomenon of the world with inner-worldly beings and as such miss the phenomenon of the world all together. Heidegger believes Descartes is the most extreme example of this tradition. In the section, “Contrast Between Our Analysis of Worldliness and Descartes’ Interpretation of the World” in *Being and Time*, Heidegger exposes Descartes’ presuppositions like Husserl did, but he also shows what has not been discussed in his ontology and how he fails in accounting for our being as a being-in-the-world. Heidegger explains and criticizes Descartes’ “world” as *res extensa* and his separation in “substance”. It is out of these criticisms that he forms his own methodology in which we are able to discover ourselves as beings in the world.

Heidegger holds that Descartes must make some distinction in “being” itself to conclude the “world” as *res extensa*; a being of extension. His distinction defines the ontological difference between “spirit” and “nature”.²¹ He separates his *ego cogito* into a conscious being; spirit, and a corporeal or bodily being; nature. Here, Husserl and Heidegger depart in their criticisms. Husserl believes that starting with the philosophizing Ego is the way to transitivity, but the presuppositions that underlie Descartes methodology have hindered him from reaching this level.

Heidegger on the other hand believes that in starting his methodology with the Ego, Descartes was unable to account for a being as a-being-in-the-world. He failed in bringing forward a being that can be considered an inner-worldly being that engages with the world. Furthermore the separation has made the problem of being even greater, especially when discussing the being of the beings themselves.

Descartes believes that both these beings have the being of substance. Heidegger points out that sometimes Descartes means substance as the being of the beings; beingness, substantiality, or he also means it as the being itself; as a particular substance. It is with the latter meaning that Descartes is able to account for the substance of a bodily being.²² These particular substances or nature ultimately for Descartes constitute the world. The consequence of this move can be seen in what Descartes understands the substance of the being to be.

He understands the substance of a bodily being as extension because it is the only property that remains constant through change. Descartes uses the example of a piece of wax to show his understanding. When melted the only thing that remains constant is the fact that the wax takes up space, or has extension, so this is the true essence of its being. In addition Descartes explains that other properties such as color, hardness, weight, texture, etc, are not essential to the corporeal being because they do not remain the same through change. He uses the example of hardness to prove this belief. When we touch a hard object, it pushes back on our hand. If we did not touch the object, hardness would not occur, but the object is still a being. So since it is still a being, yet hardness was not experienced; hardness can not be the essence of the being.²³

Descartes, in making extension the essence of particular substances or beings, he has made them objectively present. Extension literally means to take up space, and therefore the essence of the being is to take up space. So his beings as extension must be material objects in the world. Consequently, Descartes understands the ontological beingness of beings in terms of an ontic characteristic of substance; extension. He has defined the ontological in terms of the ontic.²⁴ Furthermore, Descartes only asked about the being itself and not what the mode of the being is, and therefore did not solve the ontological problem of being.

Heidegger argues that Descartes' type of being as extension is the type of being in which mathematics and science is suited to grasp. It is a spatial being that has the character of remaining what it truly is. Mathematics and physics are able to access this being because "Mathematical knowledge is regarded as the one way of apprehending beings which can always be certain of the secure possession of the being of the beings which is apprehends."²⁵ Mathematics makes accessible in beings what it truly is or what constantly remains, extension. What mathematics has made accessible constitutes the true being of the world for Descartes. Therefore this being prescribes itself to the world on the basis of its extension, or its objective presence.²⁶ So Descartes, whose ontology started with the doubting of all mathematics and science, ends with a method based on constantly objective beings that are only accessible through a presupposed mathematics and science.²⁷

In the section titled, "How the Tradition passed over Worldhood" in *History of the Concept of Time*, Heidegger further explains Descartes' theory of substances. Descartes understands substance as "something which is" and which needs no other being in order to be. The only substance which fulfills this requirement is God.²⁸ All other beings require God to come into being. So "substance" in the strictest sense can be attributed only to God, but because created beings and God are both considered beings and substance is considered the being of beings, created beings then also have some sense of substance.

There needs to be a distinction between saying "God is" and "world is" because if there was not then either the created being would be meant as the uncreated being or the uncreated being would be reduced to the created being. God by definition is infinite and the created beings by definition are finite because they need God to exist. This makes an infinite distinction between these two substances and makes it impossible for the term "being" to have a univocal meaning. When we say "God is" and "world is" we can never understand a common "is" because "we cannot distinctly see that something common is thereby intended by both."²⁹

Descartes' separation of God, "I", and "world", has made the problem of how we can be in the world more complicated and thus further from any conclusive answer through his ontology.³⁰ In this separation, he is unable to understand "I" as a being in the world and also unable to account for how the "I" understands itself as a being in the world. Heidegger holds that Descartes separation was a fatal error in his doctrine. It is here that he misses the phenomenon of the world since he is not able to turn a being into a being-in-the-world; one in which engages with the world as a being of potential.

Now that we understand the distinction of beings, the question of how the being of these beings; their substance, can be apprehended rises. Descartes says the only way to apprehend substantiality is through its' attributes. An attribute, according to Heidegger's interpretation is another property that is on top of its essential being as extension. They are not essential to the being's existence, but are in the being itself and therefore they must refer to its actual essential being; substance. Substance can not be apprehended from the fact that it exists or that it is because this substance purely for itself by itself does not affect us. We have no primary access to the substance of the being itself

in isolation. We can only apprehend what is made explicit of the being through its attributes. Descartes maintains that through these, the beingness of the being is presented. So to understand the substance of the being, one needs a prior orientation to an attribute; “a determination of that which the entity in each case is.”³¹

Heidegger argues that Descartes was not able to ontologically characterize an inner-worldly being of even material nature; which is the basis of his being as *res extensa*, in his idea that attributes are the only way to apprehend substance. Descartes has developed a fundamental stratum that ultimately fails in this characterization. The basis of this stratum is the extended being itself; *res extensa*. Layered on top of this being are the other non-essential properties or attributes; such as color, texture, weight, etc, and on top of those are values we assign to them; beautiful, ugly, good, bad, etc.³² An example of this stratum would be the idea that the table takes up space; it has extension, then the fact that the table is hard is added to that, and then finally that it is of beautiful; thus we have a beautiful hard table. This being of the world for Descartes can be equated with Heidegger’s initial thing at hand, depicted earlier in *Being and Time*.³³ The values added to these beings; do not bring forward an ontological being, but only bring out that of an ontic, constantly objective present thing. Attributes do not make Descartes’ substance any more ontologically knowable since we can not understand an ontological being through its thingliness. Therefore because Descartes’ being as extension is based on its objective presence or its thingliness, it is not able to account for an ontological inner-worldly being. It can only account for a being which is initially accessible in the thingliness of nature.³⁴

Heidegger’s interpretation of Descartes shows that Descartes has committed the problem of traditional ontology. First by starting his ontology with innerworldly beings Descartes has missed the phenomena of the world and turned its ontology into an ontology of inner-worldly beings. This ontology makes the “world” defined in terms of inner-world beings; which are extended in the world that they are defining. Secondly, in the separation Descartes makes in substances, he is unable to see the phenomenon of the world and our engagement with it as a being-in-the-world, since our being-in-the-world has been infinitely separated from it. Descartes has not accurately stated the relation or modes of being to the being-in-the-world and therefore was not able to account ontologically for the phenomena of the world and our engagement with it.

It is through these traditional mistakes that Heidegger feels he is able to reject the traditional ontological method³⁵ and thus does not start his ontology with beings as Descartes did. He starts his ontology with circumspection. We “see” things or other beings as useful in referential context, in a series of connections. These other beings are not objectively present, but they are the links or connections to each other that allow us to understand our being as a being-in-the-world. They are our relation to each other, the context of the world. In the occurrence of connections breaking is where beings are engaged as beings-in-the-world and are able to see their potentiality as being-in-the-world. The trauma that we are thrown into in this occurrence makes you realize you are already in a world and thus re-engage in this world as a potential being. We always “see” these connections and are thrown into trauma all the time because we are always already in the world. We are always already connected to it and engaged with it. From the very beginning, Heidegger is able to account for himself, other objects and other beings in the world through circumspection and through trauma he was able to explain how we are in the world as being-in-the-world.

Merleau-Ponty on Descartes

Merleau-Ponty is another phenomenologist whom has read Descartes and found a need to revive the true aim of the *cogito*. In the section titled, “The Cogito”, of his book, *Phenomenology of Perception*³⁶, Merleau-Ponty writes, “It is I who assign to my thought the objective of resuming the action of the *cogito*.”³⁷ His aim is similar to that of both Husserl’s and Heidegger’s; to take Descartes’ ideas one step further and recreate his own *cogito* or methodology in which we are able to account for our beings as a being-in-the-world; a connection that according to phenomenologists, Descartes never was able to accomplish.

In his address to Société française de philosophie,³⁸ Merleau-Ponty examines three understandings of Descartes’ *cogito*; two of which Descartes had meant in his writings and a third which Merleau-Ponty finds to be “the only solid one” that Descartes did not reach. The first understanding of Descartes’ *cogito* Merleau-Ponty calls, “the *cogito* of the psychologists”.³⁹ This is the *cogito* in which if I understand myself as existing I instantly assume that I am thinking and since I maintain this assumption, I cannot doubt it. It is a certainty of existence only when I am thinking solely of it. This certainty only includes the facts that I exist and that I think. I cannot have any other objects in this thought because then I would be thinking of presuppositions in which Descartes wants to doubt. In this understanding, I am certain about a thought with no content; meaning a thought about nothing. This certainty is therefore an abstraction. Merleau-Ponty believes this is not the *cogito* that will lead us to grasping our existence existentially.

The second understanding is different from the first in a fundamental way. In this understanding of the *cogito*, you recognize not only the fact “I think” but also the intentions of the thought. This understanding groups together the self along with other objects making the *cogito* itself an object of thought. If the *cogito* is an object, then suddenly it is as certain or uncertain as the objects it intends. This contradicts what Descartes wanted the *cogito* to be, a solo indubitable thing. Merleau-Ponty remarks that Descartes presented the *cogito* this way in his text, *Regulae*, “...when he placed one’s own existence among the most simple evidences.”⁴⁰

The third understanding in which Merleau-Ponty believes will allow us to encounter ourselves existentially is “the act of doubting in which I put in question all possible objects of my experience.”⁴¹ The act of doubting becomes aware of itself in its act and therefore cannot doubt itself. In this perception of the self, I find myself engaging with other objects as a particular thought. This understanding is different from the second because here the *cogito* does not grasp itself as existing along with the objects it intends. If the objects it was grouped with did not exist, then the ego would cease to exist as well; making certainty dependent on both the objects of thought and the self that is thinking. In addition, this *cogito* is different from the first because it is certain that there is a thinking subject that is thinking *about something*. The act of doubting is certain and allowed to have content in its’ thought. When doubting all possible objects it does not matter whether or not the object exists since in order to doubt an object, it must be there for you to doubt. You intend the object in doubt. Therefore you as an intentional being must already always be in a world along with the object that is intended. This understanding of the *cogito* is where the self is encountered existentially:

I am a thought which recaptures itself as already possessing an ideal of truth and which is the horizon of its operations. This thought, which *feels* itself rather than *sees* itself, which searches after clarity rather than possesses it, and creates truth rather than finds it...⁴²

Just like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty has gone underneath the Cartesian doctrine and exposed where Descartes has missed the phenomena of the world. Descartes does not go this far in the meaning his *cogito* and leaves us separated as an ideal self from an ideal world. However, Merleau-Ponty does recognize some truth in Descartes’ *cogito*. He agrees that “I think” and “I am” are two statements that are to be connected with each other, but only in a particular way.⁴³ “It is not the ‘I am’ which is pre-eminently contained in the ‘I think’, not my existence which is brought down to the consciousness I have of it, but conversely...”⁴⁴ It is not that I am aware of my existence that makes me exist, but it is my thinking that is in the process of my existence. Our thinking is part of an experience that gradually clarifies and rectifies itself, becoming aware of itself and finding truth and its’ own existence. I am conscious that I exist because I engage with a world that is always on hand for me.

For Merleau-Ponty the way to engage with the world is through perception. When we perceive an object, we perceive it in context with other objects, thus we are perceiving relations, not simply an object as Descartes believes. The act of perception is not an intellectual act, but a practical act; it involves activity and movement in order to grasp the object as a whole. What is perceived is never fully present to us. When perceiving a chair in a kitchen, only one side is actually visible in this perception, but in order to be a chair, there must be an unseen side. Since perception is a practical act we are able to touch and move the chair or change our viewpoint of the chair in order to see the unseen side. No matter the angle though, the object is given only immanently because there are an infinite number of views in which object is given and it can never be fully whole for us.

Through out the history of philosophy, objects are immanent and thinking is transcendent. Merleau-Ponty disagrees. In perception, we are with the object but yet at the same time the object is never fully there for us. Perception is both immanent and transcendent; objects are both there and not there for us. Additionally, what is the totality of all perceptible things is the world. Just as Heidegger believes, the world for Merleau-Ponty is all possible perceptions. It is not an object that is the collection of all objectively present things as Descartes makes the world to be.⁴⁵ The world is already there for me, as a field of open possibilities in which I am constantly engaged with. Merleau-Ponty revives the primary truth in the *cogito*. “The primary truth is indeed ‘I think’, but only provided that we understand thereby ‘I belong to myself’ while belonging to the world.”⁴⁶ This is the transcendental event in which Descartes had originally aimed.

Origins of Phenomenology in Descartes

Now that the critiques have been explored, it can be shown how phenomenology was able to rise out of them. In particular, the fundamental ideas that originate are seen in Descartes’ attempt to found the sciences in absolute certainty, his emphasis on discovering existence through self reflection, and in his skeptical method of doubt.

The origin of Phenomenology in giving a foundation to the natural sciences arise from Descartes’ notion stated in the first few lines of his *Mediations*,

Several years have now passed since I first realized how numerous were the false opinions that in my youth I had taken to be true, and thus how doubtful were all those that I subsequently built

upon them. And thus I realized that once in my life I had to raze everything to the ground and begin again from the original foundations, if I wanted to establish anything firm and lasting in the sciences.⁴⁷

This is the idea that Husserl has in mind when starting his meditations; which in turn gives Phenomenology the same aim; to begin again from the original foundations. He also follows Descartes' idea in finding existence through self discovery. As Descartes writes, "Accordingly, I have today suitably freed my mind of all cares, secured for myself a period of leisurely tranquility, and am withdrawing into solitude."⁴⁸ Merleau-Ponty believes this is the idea that Descartes does not dig deep enough into in order to reach a transcendent level, but nonetheless he; along with other phenomenologists, followed in Descartes' footsteps by turning into the self. Furthermore, even though there is a fundamental difference between Husserl's phenomenological epoché and Descartes skeptical method of doubt, it is easy to see how the former originated in the latter. As written in Descartes' First Meditation:

But eventually I am forced to admit that there is nothing among the things I once believed to be true [God, senses, physics, mathematics, corporeal things, etc...] which is not permissible to doubt... Thus I must be no less careful to withhold assent henceforth even from these beliefs than I would from those that are patently false, if I wish to find anything certain.⁴⁹

Husserl has "parenthesized" the very same things that Descartes doubts and holds them not to be true. They both have removed these things from their mind in order to find something more clear and certain to build from. In these three ideas; all of which phenomenology has critiqued of Descartes, the origins of Phenomenology and the affinity between it and the Cartesian doctrine are made explicit.

A Reinterpretation of Descartes

It is through the similarities of Phenomenology and Descartes that a reinterpretation of Descartes can be given. First it is necessary to briefly go over the way in which mainstream scholarship has interpreted Descartes' fundamental ideas of "truth as correspondence" and Descartes' problem of mind/body dualism. Basically, "truth as correspondence" is understood as one having an innate idea in the mind that matches to something in the outer world. This is how science is meant to understand itself in truth. Furthermore in this interpretation, the body is understood as completely separate from the since the essence of the mind is thinking and the essence of the body is extension. This is the idea that causes the problem of mind/body dualism that is debated throughout the rest of Modernity. The body does not help in discovering truth or the existence of an outer world. Now after showing Phenomenology's origins in Descartes, a new interpretation can appear.

First, the mind and the body do work together as one in order for a being to connect as a being-in-the-world, which solves the problem of mind/body dualism. Descartes writes, "For clearly these sensations of thirst, hunger, pain, and so on are nothing but certain confused modes of thinking arising from the union and, as it were, the commingling of the mind with the body."⁵⁰ Descartes recognizes that the mind and the body are commingled and do work together in the understanding of sensations brought on from the outside world. The body picks up sensations that are coming from the world, which may not be essential in knowing the world itself, but they cause ideas to come to mind. These sensations are essential to a being as a being-in-the-world because without them, it would be impossible to respond to it. The mind is simply a thinking thing and can only understand the idea that it has been given. Therefore this correspondence between the mind and the body is necessarily intentional, to put it in Husserl's terminology. The ideas the mind has innately must have a direction towards the sensations that the body sends to it. There is always "an aboutness" to an idea. "But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and that also imagines and senses."⁵¹ This thinking thing for Descartes doubts, but in order to doubt; it must be doubting something. It understands, but in order to understand; it must be understanding something. The same can be said for affirming, denying, willing, refusing, imagining, and sensing; each must be about something. This working together of the mind and body towards something is what makes a being a being-in-the-world for Descartes.

This correspondence for Descartes though is not working solely in the being itself, it is through God. God fulfills intentionality for Descartes. Normally, God is seen as an entity that further separates the mind and body, but in this reinterpretation, God is an entity that challenges this separation:

And thus I see plainly that the certainty and truth of every science depends exclusively upon the knowledge of the true God, to the extent that, prior to my becoming aware of him, I was incapable of achieving perfect knowledge about anything else. But now it is possible for me to achieve full and certain knowledge about countless things...⁵²

The innate disposition that is given to the mind by God according to Descartes only helps to close this separation. For Descartes, it is because of God that the mind and the body are commingled:

...with what God has bestowed on me insofar as I am composed of mind and body. Accordingly, it is this nature that teaches me to avoid things that produce a sensation of pain and to pursue things that produce a sensation of pleasure, and the like.⁵³

For Descartes, God has given innate ideas that through sensations of the world, a being comes to understand the world and moreover it makes science possible. God is the link between the mind and the body and the world. For Descartes, it is because of God that intentionality occurs and through that, a being becomes a being-in-the-world with certainty as its foundation.

In conclusion, through showing the phenomenological critiques of Descartes and how the origins of Phenomenology have risen out of these critiques, a reinterpretation of Descartes appears; an interpretation that is different from mainstream scholarship and shows how Descartes' *Meditations* can be seen as a setting in motion the critique of Modernity; the age that it established. In the reinterpretation, the Cartesian doctrine goes beyond the ideas that have shaped Modernity; in particular the mind/body distinction and the further separation caused by God. Both these are essential ideas and have shaped this period in the history of philosophy. This interpretation shows that the mind and body are not as separate as once thought and furthermore, that God is an entity that encloses the gap. The critiques of Phenomenology have shown that Descartes can be seen as a philosopher whose ideas were ahead of his time and what's more, Phenomenology is indebted to Descartes since it grew out of the very doctrine it was critiquing.

¹ Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Trans. by, Cress, Donald A. Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 1998. pp. 59-103.

² Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian Meditations*. Trans. by, Cairns, Dorion. Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997. pp. 1-26

³ This paragraph is consulted out of *ibid*, pp.1-2.

⁴ *Ibid*, pp.3.

⁵ *Ibid*, pp.3.

⁶ *Ibid*, pp.5.

⁷ *Ibid*, pp.4-6.

⁸ *Ibid*, pp.7-8.

⁹ *Ibid*, pp.7.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp.24.

¹¹ *Ibid*, pp.9.

¹² *Ibid*, pp.8-9.

¹³ *Ibid*, pp. 10-12.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 12-13.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 17-18.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 14-20.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, pp.20-21.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 21-24.

¹⁹ Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. by, Stambaugh, Joan. Ablany, New York: SUNY Press, 2006. pp. 83-94.

²⁰ Heidegger, Martin. *History of the Concept of Time*. Trans. by Kisiel, Theodore. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992. pp. 171-185.

²¹ *Being and Time*, pp. 84.

²² *Ibid*, pp. 84.

²³ *Ibid*, pp. 84-85.

²⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 88.

²⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 89.

²⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 89.

²⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 89.

²⁸ Heidegger notes that this is not a religious meaning of God, but is the name for an entity in which idea of being as such is realized in its genuine sense. It is purely an ontological concept of the perfect entity. (*History of the Concept of Time*, pp. 172-173).

²⁹ *History of the Concept of Time*, pp. 173-174. Heidegger also notes in these pages that Descartes is behind the Scholastics in this belief because at least they are able to see the term "being" as analogous to both God and world.

³⁰ *Being and Time*, pp. 88.

³¹ *Ibid*, pp. 174-176.

³² *Ibid*, pp. 91-92.

³³ *Ibid*, pp. 67-71.

³⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 91-92.

³⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 93.

³⁶ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. by Smith, Colin. New York: Routledge Classics, 2002. pp. 429-475.

³⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 431.

³⁸ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "The Primacy of Perception." Address to: Société française de philosophie. Trans. by Edie, James M. 23 Nov. 1946. pp. 12-42.

³⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 21.

⁴⁰ Ibid, pp. 22.

⁴¹ Ibid, pp. 22.

⁴² Ibid, pp. 22.

⁴³ *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 446.

⁴⁴ Ibid, pp. 446.

⁴⁵ "The Primacy of Perception, pp. 13-17.

⁴⁶ *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 474.

⁴⁷ *Meditations*, pp. 59.

⁴⁸ Ibid, pp. 59.

⁴⁹ Ibid, pp. 62.

⁵⁰ Ibid, pp. 98.

⁵¹ Ibid, pp. 66.

⁵² Ibid, pp. 92.

⁵³ Ibid, pp. 99.

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