

The Irradicality of Descartes' Radicality: A Phenomenological Critique of Descartes' Metaphysics

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Introduction

The term, metaphysics, is a coinage from two Greek words "Meta"(after) and "Physike"(physics or nature). Taken together, metaphysics means "after nature" or "beyond nature." As a field of study, it is "the branch of philosophy that deals with first principles and seeks to explain the nature of being or reality (*ontology*) and of the origin and structure of the world (*cosmology*); it is closely associated with a theory of knowledge (*epistemology*)" (Butchvarov, 1999:563). So metaphysics cannot be reduced to just one of the above mentioned features of the world but can be said to engage in the exploration of the most general features of the world in which we live. Lending credence to the position that metaphysics has many features, Butchvarov asserts that most generally, metaphysics is "the philosophical investigation of the nature, constitution, and structure of reality." For him, metaphysics "...is broader in scope than science, e.g., physics and even cosmology (the science of the nature, structure, and origin of the universe as a whole), since one of its traditional concerns is the existence of non-physical entities, e.g., God." He adds that metaphysics "...is also more fundamental, since it investigates questions science does not address but the answers to which it presupposes. Are there, for instance, physical objects at all, and does every event have a cause?" The insistence of logical positivism on the verifiability of any knowledge claim occasioned the rejection of metaphysics understood in the last sense. For them (logical positivists), metaphysical propositions have no cognitive meaning since they cannot be empirically verified. Since empiricists insist on the observable and we cannot observe a cause/effect relation, recent philosophers such as Quine reject metaphysics on the basis that it is only science that gives genuine knowledge as it demonstrates any cause/effect relation.

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A positivist such as Strawson makes an important distinction of metaphysics. For him, metaphysics can be purely descriptive (*descriptive metaphysics*). This kind of metaphysics is satisfied with describing "...the actual structure of our thought about the world." It is different from *revisionary metaphysics* which Strawson opines, is interested in producing a "better structure." In other words, revisionary metaphysics thinks that the ways man thinks about his world do not cohere and some categories are more insightful than others. Thus revisionary metaphysics attempts to open up new ways of thinking about the world to us. According to Strawson, Plato, Descartes, and Berkeley belong to the camp of revisionary metaphysicians who, he believes, are intellectually more daring and often engage in wild philosophical reasoning. Descriptive metaphysicians are intellectually more conservative. Debate on this distinction is on-going but it is necessary to bring to mind recent strands in the study of being (ontology) or metaphysical discourse.

In this essay, we look at the uniqueness of the contribution of Rene Descartes to the study of being by means of his "Radical Doubt." Descartes opened up the study of being from an angle never known in the history of western philosophy by means of his professed "radicality." But was his radicality radical? It is the contention of this essay that from the angle of the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, Descartes was not radical enough.

Descartes' radical doubt

In the history of Western philosophy, being was associated with the subject (man) for the first time in the philosophy of Rene Descartes. This found manifestation in the dictum "*Cogito ergo sum*" which means "I think, therefore I am." In the perspective of Descartes, "...here I make my discovery: thought exists; it alone cannot be separated from me. I am; I exist – this is certain" (Lafleur, 1993:19). By thought, Descartes means that by which he grasps or comprehends all that he has awareness of as functioning in him. Even if what he is thinking about is false, it is very certain that he, the human being entertaining these thoughts exists and cannot have his existence denied. The more a person doubts his existence,

the more he affirms it because there has to be an individual for there to be the doubt of his existence. And for Descartes, doubt is a form of thinking; to doubt is to think. So, this thought is what is most true, most certain, and unchangeable. For Descartes, therefore, **being is thought and thought is being**. This thought, this *Cogito*, becomes "an extraordinary discovery and the first principle of all of Descartes' work" (Robinson and Garratt, 1999:57). This is how Descartes presents his metaphysics and it would become for him the starting point of philosophy (Lafleur, 1960:24).

Descartes' project was not to lay out metaphysics in the likes of Plato and Aristotle, but clearly he wanted to set philosophy on a firm foundation, that which is not subject to individual interpretation or change. Even if change is the only constant, the "change" remains "unchanged" (Heraclitus' doctrine of eternal flux). For Descartes, if philosophy is defined as the love of wisdom and if by wisdom we do not only comprehend the ground of being, understand and exercise the virtue of prudence in our daily dealings, but also by it attain the most excellent knowledge necessary for a good moral life and creativity, then philosophy embraces not only metaphysics but also physics and cosmology, with metaphysics as the roots of all. In his philosophical scheme, the other sciences would be the branches stemming from the trunk of physics.

Using his analogy of a tree, if the roots of metaphysics must be what roots are to the trunk of trees, then they must be certain, firm, and solid. It must not be a reliance on authority as he thought Aristotelians did. For them, (Aristotelians), the whole of philosophy was encapsulated in the works of Aristotle. The real inventor of a scholastic system in Islam, the Persian Avicenna was so fascinated by Aristotle that he confessed to have read Aristotle's *Metaphysics* forty times without understanding it but was able to understand it to his satisfaction only after reading Alfarabi's commentary; Averroes considered the genius of Aristotle as the culmination of the human intellect. For him, Aristotle was the completer of human science, the model of human perfection and the author of a system which is the supreme truth (Coplestone, 1993:191-197). Thomas Aquinas simply calls him "the philosopher." For Aristotelians, therefore,

the validity of any philosophical proposition depended on how it agreed with the philosophy of Aristotle. In the reasoning of Descartes, we cannot rely on past philosophers to answer present questions, questions which they may never have thought, raised or intended to answer. Neither can we use their philosophy to foster present doctrine. Philosophy was not going to proceed in that manner. If philosophy were a matter of relying on authority, then new knowledge would not be possible. His path, his method, therefore was to discard all past philosophical traditions and rely on reason, not authority, to attain philosophical truth. This was his systematic method.

To invoke his analogy of a tree again, the trunk of the tree is physics resting on the roots of metaphysics which will be the intuitively apprehended existence of the "I" and from this apprehension Descartes will establish the criterion of truth, offer proof for the existence of God and the existence of the material world.

By employing the analogy of a tree, Descartes was of the view that there was an underlying unity to all different branches of knowledge. This found manifestation in his profound interest in mathematics. For him, mathematics shows the basic fundamental structures shared by every branch of knowledge sprung from the roots of metaphysics. Captivated by the certainty of mathematics, Descartes notes thus:

Considering that among all those who have previously sought truth in the sciences, mathematicians alone have been able to find some demonstrations, some certain and evident reasons, I had no doubt that I should begin where they did, although I expected no advantage except to accustom my mind to work with rules and not to be satisfied with bad reasoning (cf. Lafleur, 1960:16).

Fascinated by mathematics, Descartes was thus set to learn from some of the branches of mathematics because he saw that although the objects they discuss are different, all these branches are in agreement in limiting their consideration to the relationships or proportions between their various objects. With this mind set, he was to show that by adopting a few rules,

it was possible to discover true knowledge. Descartes' first rule was: "...never to accept anything as true unless I recognized it to be certainly and evidently as such: that is...to include nothing in my conclusions unless it presented itself so clearly and distinctly to my mind that there was no reason or occasion to doubt it" (cf. Lafleur, 1960:15). No idea was to be taken as true unless it was *clear* and *distinct* in his mind. By "clear" Descartes means that ideas in my mind must be as obvious and apparent to someone as material properties that they perceive with their eyes. A perception is considered to be distinct to an individual if it is not only clear but also different from all other perceptions so that nothing remains unclear about it. A noticeable instance of this kind of perception is seen in geometry whereby we do not confuse one geometrical figure with another. One is clear and distinct from another and no one is confused about it. For Descartes, some ideas are from the individual, others are innate, still others must come from outside of them and are grasped by the mind and are not of its creation or construct. The idea of God is such an idea and cannot come from the individual; it must come from something with at least, as much reality as the idea itself. And his idea of God is the traditional Christian notion of a Being that is transcendent, all-knowing, and perfect. This idea, which he perceives clearly and distinctly, cannot come from me as an imperfect being; it must have been caused by a being outside of me and therefore God exists. According to Blackburn (1999:37-38),

Descartes convinced himself that the argument was good: every step in it was 'clear and distinct'. So, now he has God, and God is no deceiver. Still, remember that to do this he had to trust his clear and distinct ideas as sources of truth. Nevertheless, isn't there an awful hole in this procedure? What happened to the Demon? Might not even our clear and distinct ideas lead us astray? To close off this possibility, it seems, Descartes turns around and uses God – the God whose existence he has just proved – as the guarantor that what we perceive clearly and distinctly must be true.

Thus, it was Descartes' ability to "play" with the notion of the clarity and distinctiveness of ideas and thought that he was able to prove the existence of God and the immortality of the soul.

In Descartes' words, his second rule was to: "... divide each of the difficulties which I encountered into as many parts as possible, and as might be required for an easier solution" (cf. Blackburn, 1999:15). That is, when you break down difficulties encountered into tiny fragments, you make room for easier comprehension. His third rule was to argue from the simple to the complex. And finally, he was to go over all that he has done carefully. In this way, mistakes made by previous philosophers are avoided and the move is steady towards sound logic and scientific knowledge. All these grow from the certainty of the "I".

Descartes' reliance on his thinking and his rejection of traditional philosophy made it possible for him to reason that philosophy would eventually rest on a firm foundation: the roots of thought – human reason. Descartes is known for having changed the terms of reference of metaphysics by insisting on reason rather than authority and by stressing the place of the subject as the starting point of philosophy. While philosophers like Aristotle would consider metaphysics as *knowledge par excellence* because it probes the ultimate cause of being and so the starting point of philosophy, Descartes considers *thought* or *cogito* which makes that probe possible, being and the starting point of philosophy. In the view of philosophers after him, Descartes' stress on reason and its capabilities seemed to have been exaggerated and so much was taken for granted. He had argued for the method of a presuppositionless inquiry but seemed not to have been radical enough. Is reason capable of making any claims in metaphysics? How does knowledge take place? What can reason know and cannot know? These were the concerns that gave rise to the 'critical' philosophy of Immanuel Kant as he set to investigate first of all what constitutes knowledge and consequently the grounds for the possibility of metaphysics.

So Descartes was not radical enough by taking so much for granted. At this juncture, we concentrate on Edmund Husserl's critique of the Cartesian irradicality. For him (Husserl), Descartes displayed this irradicality

by settling for the certainty of the ego or the "I"; Descartes had anticipated phenomenology but, like the biblical Moses, did not quite get there.

The analogy of the Biblical Moses

Phenomenology is the study of appearances; it concerns itself with what is given to us in consciousness. Phenomenology "is ...the study of essences, but it also attempts to place essences back into existence" (cf. Butcharov, 1999:665). It is from this understanding of phenomenology that we wish to liken Descartes to Moses, a notable figure in Jewish and Christian religions.

According to the Christian Bible, God had seen the suffering of his people Israel in the land of Egypt where they had lived for many years as a result of famine in their country. Hearing their cry for help, God sent Moses to deliver them from the jaws of their oppressors and take them to the promised-land, the land he had promised their fathers he would give them. According to the story, Moses faced so many huddles ranging from convincing Pharaoh to let God's people go home, to internal grumblings on their way to the promised-land. At Meribah, Moses displayed insufficiency of faith in the Lord who had been their strength and that of the people of Israel (Numbers 20:10). The consequence if this was death; he was not going to reach the promised-land. To complete the job and lead the people of Israel to the promised-land, God ordered Moses to transfer his power and mandate to Joshua, son of Nun by laying his hands on him, an order he complied with (Numbers 28:22-23). From then on, Joshua worked with Moses until they came close to the promised-land. God allowed Moses to view the promised-land only from a distance. Holy Scripture communicates this point in the words:

Go up on Mount Nebo, here in the Abarim Mountains [it is in the land of Moab facing Jericho], and view the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites as their possession. Then you shall die on the mountain you have climbed, and shall be taken to your people...because you broke faith with me. You may indeed view the land at a

distance, you shall not enter the land which I am giving to the Israelites (Deuteronomy 32:44-52).

True to God's word, "...there, in the land of Moab, Moses, the servant of the Lord, died as the Lord had said; and ...was buried" (Deuteronomy 34:5-6) without ever feasting his "eyes upon it" Deuteronomy 34:4) (that is, the promised land).

From the point of view of the founder of the phenomenological movement, Descartes was very much like the biblical Moses. He (Descartes) had suggested a method whereby he was not going to take anything as a given, all presuppositions by previous philosophers were going to be doubted or questioned, or to use the language of Edmund Husserl, they were going to be "bracketed" (or have their judgment suspended) in order to arrive at essences (which is what is given in consciousness). Husserl believed that Descartes' radical doubt was intended to arrive at essences (phenomenology), that which always is, the solid foundation of philosophy and all knowledge (which we refer to here as "the promised land). Instead of "bracketing" even "thought" or the "I" to arrive at essences, Descartes settled for its certainty. By means of what Husserl called "phenomenological reduction" or "phenomenological epoche", Husserl was of the opinion that Descartes should have "bracketed" the "I" or the "ego" to arrive at essences. This was the task he (Husserl) was to accomplish via the phenomenological reduction or phenomenological *epoche*.

Edmund Husserl and the phenomenological reduction

In the perspective of Husserl, consciousness is always consciousness of something, whether that which the individual is conscious of exists in the extramental or physical world is irrelevant; something is always given to the individual with "evidence" in his consciousness. By "evidence", Husserl does not mean certainty but clarity hence the remark, "The being of the world, by reason of the evidence of natural experience, must no longer be for us an obvious matter of fact; it too must be for us, henceforth, an acceptance-phenomenon"(cf. Cairns, 1960:17-18). Therefore, "evidence" is what is given clearly and distinctly in our consciousness. In his theory

of intentionality, Husserl notes that "intentionality is an essential peculiarity of the sphere of mental processes taken universally insofar as all mental processes in some manner or other share in it ..." (cf. Kerstein, 1998:199). Every consciousness in its acts, intends (that is, tends towards, refers to) something. There is no consciousness that is not of something. By consciousness, Husserl means that realm where all our awareness takes place. That realm is arrived at by means of a method called "the phenomenological reduction" (cf. Kerstein, 1998:132) or the phenomenological *epoche*. This is a special attitude of the mind as opposed to what Husserl calls the "*natural attitude*" in which we take the being of the world obvious. It is so very obvious that no one would think of asserting it expressly in a proposition. Put in another way, the *natural attitude* is "our straightforward involvement with things and the world" (Sokoloswki, 1999). This was the attitude of Descartes when he affirmed the certainty of the "I" or the ego after rejecting the certainty of all externals and all that he had hitherto accepted as certain, including even the being of God. By so doing, he stopped short of ushering in phenomenology, the realm of only appearances in consciousness. Descartes should have taken one more leap, the leap of the "phenomenological attitude" which is the reflective point of view of from which we carry out philosophical analysis of the intentions exercised in the natural attitude and the objective correlates of these intentions. In this attitude, we put out of action or suspend all the intentions and convictions of the natural attitude; this does not mean that we doubt or negate them only that we take a distance from them and contemplate their structure. That is to say that in the phenomenological attitude:

Reflection is based upon a position that requires that the phenomenologist free herself from her infatuation, from her belief in the being of thematic objects. Instead of swimming in the stream of just-living, she rises above it; she no longer carries out her interest in the existence of intended objects, and instead becomes an "*uninterested*" or "*disinterested observer*." She holds herself out of the relationship that takes place between herself as a naturally

experiencing person and the objects appearing as existent to such a person. She places this relationship *in brackets*, so to speak, and observes the intentional life that is now within the brackets from outside" (Held, 2003)

This suspension of judgment or "bracketing" of relationship is what Husserl calls the phenomenological *epoche*. *Epoche* is a Greek word and it literally means to "hold oneself back" or "to stop." In the context in which Husserl uses it, it refers to the attitude in which one holds oneself back or refrains from taking a stance on existence. By this abstention from any position-taking, "I can grasp what is present as present, what is past as past, each as itself. I do so now, as the Ego philosophizes and exercises the aforesaid abstention," (cf. Kerstein, 1998:199). Therefore, it is the *epoche* that first makes possible the transposition from a phenomenology of "insight into essence" into a strict unbiased *philosophical* method (cf. Held, 2003).

The *epoche* is possible because something is given to the individual and then "reduced" to consciousness. Hence consciousness is always a referent to something; it intends a thing. Thus, Husserl remarks that it is intentionality that characterizes consciousness in the pregnant sense and which, at the same time, justifies designating the whole stream or mental processes as the stream of consciousness and as the unity of one consciousness (cf. Kerstein, 1998:199). Held (2003) expresses this perspective of Husserl when he takes this position, "If consciousness were not a referring consciousness, possessing the capacity, the 'ability' to bring the empty, indirect, indefinite 'intended' to fulfillment, then it would not have any intentionally given object. Thus, intentional acts or intentional experiences represent units of consciousness that one understands oneself as having when expressing oneself in a statement. In this trend of reasoning, one's objectless (that is, empty) intentional experiences such as your thought of a flying antelope or a soccer game on the sun has content, what it lacks is a corresponding object or real event – an actual flying antelope or an actual soccer game on the sun. It is therefore intentionality that gives consciousness its objective meaning. Husserl arrives at this position by means of a very important distinction he made, the distinction between *noesis* and *noema*."

Noesis vs Noema

Noesis is a Greek word which means to comprehend or understand through the activity of the intellect alone; it refers to cognition. For Husserl, *noesis* refers to acts of consciousness. Acts of consciousness include thinking (and doubt is a form of thinking) memory, feeling, etc. *Noema* means what is meant by the acts of consciousness; it refers to meanings. Hence every doubt is of something; every memory is of something, every feeling is of something, even if that which I doubt or remember or feel is not out there in the extramental world. Therefore, every noesis has a corresponding noema. In the perspective of Husserl then, the doubt which for Descartes confirmed his existence was only an act of consciousness, not consciousness itself, so the question of existence should have been "bracketed" in order to arrive at essences which will be only that which is in consciousness. That which is in consciousness (which Husserl now calls pure consciousness, a perspective on phenomena) will exist, even if the "I" or the "ego" and the whole world were to cease to be. This is how philosophy is set on a solid foundation, the foundation of essence, not the certainty of thought.

Conclusion

As we have noted, Husserl did see in Descartes some anticipation of phenomenology when he proposed the theory of radical doubt, a presuppositionless inquiry, a "bracketing" of the existence of whatever is presented in consciousness. As Husserl puts it in his words:

This universal depriving of acceptance, this "inhibiting" or "putting out of play" of all positions taken toward the already given objective world and, in the first place, all existential positions (those concerning being, illusion, possible being, being likely, probable, etc.) – or, as it is also called, this "phenomenological *epoche*" and "parenthesizing" of the Objective world – therefore does leave us ...something (cf. Kerstein, 1998:20)

In other words, we gain something by means of the phenomenological *epoche* or the "bracketing" of existence. What is gained from this process

is that philosophy, as Husserl viewed it, is set on a solid foundation. Thus for him, Descartes had begun the journey to the realm of essence; though there was some anticipation of phenomenology in Descartes' vowed radicality, he was not true to his radicality when he affirmed the certainty of the existence of the "I" or "ego." So, he did not take philosophy to the "promised land" (which is phenomenology). For Descartes to have done so, even the question of the existence of the ego should have been "bracketed." The thoughts (*cogitationes*) which Descartes was so sure of from which he inferred the certainty of the ego are for Husserl mere phenomena and representations of reality and not reality itself. Those realities outside of consciousness, what Immanuel Kant calls things-in-themselves, given to a self in consciousness should be "parenthesized." Our concentration should be on appearances, mere phenomena. Phenomena appear to consciousness through acts of consciousness (*noesis*) and are outside of consciousness. They (acts of consciousness) too should be "bracketed." Every thought is thought of something; every *noesis* (which are acts of consciousness) has its corresponding *noemata* (what is meant, meanings) and the realm of *noema* is the realm of essences. When acts of consciousness are "bracketed" or "parenthesized" as well, what is in consciousness is pure phenomena. For Husserl then, after the method of the "phenomenological *epoche*" or "phenomenological reduction" which is the narrowing down of what is presented, to phenomena and "bracketing" the question of existence, what is left is pure consciousness. Pure consciousness is "the unifying realm where all our awareness takes place" (Strathern, 2002:25). Pure consciousness is a perspective on phenomena and is itself not phenomena. It is simply a vintage point, a mere projector which never appears on a movie screen. It is this projector that is being that endures even if the individual and the whole world were to cease to be. This is indeed radical!

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