

Descartes, the Pioneer of the Enlightenment

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ABSTRACT: The article addresses the fundamental elements of Descartes' embeddedness in the mediaeval and ancient tradition. The more elaborate explication of the common elements, shared by Descartes and his predecessors, enables us to reveal more clearly the rupture point in Descartes' thought, and shows clearly in the direction of his undisputed legacy for the later times, including French Materialism.

Special attention is paid to M. Heidegger's claim, based on his specific understanding of the history of philosophy, that Descartes represents the paradigmatic shift in the self-understanding of man, which crucially marks the latter development of philosophy, both idealistic and materialistic. Yet another author worthy of explicating in this context is M. A. Gillespie, who clearly adopts Heidegger's view and further corroborates Descartes' ontological shift to be read from his markedly different theology.

Keywords: *Descartes; Enlightenment; metaphysics; rational theology; ontology*

Introduction

Back then, when the foundations of the magnificent abode of philosophy were being laid for the first time, Aristotle spoke of the divineness of theory as the thinking of thinking. What then could be the – arguably undeniable – contribution of Descartes to the eventuation of the modern, Enlightenment philosophical paradigm, if his *cogito* as the thinking thing is so obviously resembling Aristotle's *noesis* noesews as the thinking of thinking? The question raised readily betrays the basic orientation, or method, of our approach to the history of philosophy. Clearly, it decidedly turns away from the universalistic historical approach, for which basic concepts, or categories, are but identical chess figures undergoing various arrangements on the universally self-same chessboard; and the underlying premise of this approach being the »self-evident« self-presence or self-giveness of the subjectivity of the subject, which remains identically the same throughout history. Were we to adopt this approach, the answer to the question raised above would be obvious, and the question merely rhetorical. Instead, the line of thought to be pursued here is about to show how history of philosophy turns out to be far more than »just« the

universal history of rational subjectivity coming to its full completion, exactly in that it will attempt to show how Descartes' dramatic entrance into the historical currents of philosophy is actually the very birthplace of the modern (rather than universal) paradigm of subjectivity, the event which could only roughly, yet quite correctly be labelled as anthropocentrism.

Descartes' Anthropocentrism

The first, and most obvious, clue to the rise of anthropocentric paradigm is Descartes' (philosophical) relationship with God. We need to merely recall his attitude towards the divinity in his *Meditations*, where he decides in favour of his existence with the first necessary premise affirmed in his clear and distinct mind that, in order for him to exist, God needs to be truthful and cannot be deceitful. The decision for or against the existence of God is thus placed on the (ontologically weak as they may be) shoulders of the human being. Nothing of the sort can be found in Aristotle's *theologia rationalis*, or more appropriately, *theologike*.

In his famous *Meditations*, we do indeed find many a passage clear intimations of the meditator's humble comportment towards the highest being, like the one below:

For I have certainly no cause to complain that God has not given me an intelligence which is more powerful, or a natural light which is stronger than that which I have received from Him, since it is proper to the finite understanding not to comprehend a multitude of things, and it is proper to a created understanding to be finite; on the contrary, I have every reason to render thanks to God who owes me nothing and who has given me all the perfections I possess, and I should be far from charging Him with injustice, and with having deprived me of, or wrongfully withheld from me, these perfections which He has not bestowed upon me.¹

We should not, however, mistake this unwillingness to charge God with injustice for true pious humbleness, as was beautifully demonstrated by Heidegger, who stresses the impossibility to pray for Descartes' God. The following passage is most telling in this sense:

And the whole strength of the argument which I have here made use of to prove the existence of God consists in this, that I recognise that it is not possible that my nature should be what it is, and indeed that I should have in myself the idea of a God, if God did not veritably exist a God, I say, whose idea is in me, i.e. who possesses all those supreme perfections of which our

¹ Descartes, *Meditations of First Philosophy*, Blackmasks Online 2002, Meditation IV, p. 24.

mind may indeed have some idea but without understanding them all, who is liable to no errors or defect [and who has none of all those marks which denote imperfection]. From this it is manifest that *He cannot be a deceiver*, since the light of nature teaches us that fraud and deception necessarily proceed from some defect.² [emphasis J. M. L.]

With this, *axis mundi, omphalos ges*, was once and for all placed into the »belly button« of the human being. Simply imagine: not only did Descartes provide a line of argumentation for the existence of God; astoundingly enough, the argumentation became grounded in the decision of the human being, based on the intuitively clear and distinct representation, on an act of will, which proclaims: God *cannot be otherwise* that this. And thus begins the story of the modern *ego cogito and ego volo*, as the ever more prevailing anthropo-centric thought, culminating in godless antropodicy of Nietzsche's self-willed overman.

As straightforward as this story may be, it is of course far from being this simple. Descartes has, as many a scholar today readily admits, jumped from the springboard of the mediaeval metaphysical (notion of the) Substance. And perhaps even more importantly, he has failed to leave behind something else: if the mediaeval paradigmatic compartment nurtured the certainty of redemption, of course via the Other, Descartes shifted the tectonic only insofar as the attunement of certainty, once guaranteed by the Other, has moved into the interiority of *cogito*, and thus transformed itself into *self-certainty of self-redemption*. That this is no mere fancy of a day dreamer can be easily, and astoundingly as well, corroborated with the help of a much later Cartesian thinker Edmund Husserl, who in his *Crisis of European Sciences*, towards the very end, compares his transcendental turn to religious conversion.

The intertwining of the premodern and modern philosophical paradigm can be even more thoroughly unearthed with the help of the late mediaeval Jesuit Francisco Suárez (and Descartes has definitely read his work), who has earned his reputation for being the first systematic thinker of Aristotle's heritage. Suárez's metaphysical systemisation of Aristotle's philosophy, explicated, or better, categorized in what was before re-appropriated in a massive variety of non-systematic commentaries, is the shortest possible shortcut to the grist to the mill of our underlying thought: namely that metaphysics as the root of all sciences (the trunk and the branches included, as Descartes himself rewardingly illustrates) always already, in advance, remains the root of all philosophical endeavour, all post-modern and so-called post-metaphysical attempts included – fortunately or unfortunately.

The author who rewardingly brought our attention to this rather inconspicuous debt of modern philosophy to mediaeval thought is actually the author who is

² Ibid., p. 21.

a true connoisseur of mediaeval philosophy. Before Martin Heidegger, a renowned 20-century thinker, started with his famous interpretation of Aristotle, distilling from him his thinking of being, he had done extensive work on mediaeval philosophy. His habilitation thesis, *Duns Scotus's Doctrine of Categories and Meaning*, and his subsequent lectures on philosophy of religion, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life* are only the tip of the iceberg in his life-long endeavour to deconstruct both theological and philosophical traditions to their common, ancient Greek conceptual roots. And one of the mediaeval authors who deserved his meticulous attention, and rightfully so, is Suárez. Consider for example the following passage from Heidegger's *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (1988, 80):

Suárez is the thinker who had the strongest influence on modern philosophy. Descartes is directly dependent on him, using his terminology almost everywhere. It is Suárez who for the first time systematized medieval philosophy and above all ontology. Before him the Middle Ages, including Thomas and Duns Scotus, treated ancient thought only in commentaries, which deal with the texts *seriatim*.

Heidegger's philosophical thrust can be exemplified with his strong urge at a destruction of mediaeval and modern philosophy, bringing it back to its proper origin, to the great beginning of philosophy in Aristotle. His goal was to track the premodern and modern notions and concepts back to their Aristotelian origin, and exposing the later conceptualizations of Aristotle as inauthentic re-appropriations of the great beginner. What Suárez did, according to Heidegger, was to systematize mediaeval philosophy, providing, for the first time in the history of philosophy, an all-encompassing and systematic interpretation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, which, as we all know, can hardly be deemed a coherent work. According to the Suárez' scheme, clear distinctions were drawn between general ontology (*metaphysica generalis*) and three special metaphysics (*metaphysicae specialis*), which included ontology of nature (*cosmologia rationalis*), ontology of mind (*psychologia rationalis*) and ontology of God (*theologia rationalis*). And it is this classification of metaphysics, found in Suárez' *Metaphysical Disputations*, that provides a valuable clue to a more genuine understanding of the dramatic history of philosophy in its passage from the mediaeval to modern philosophy up to this day.

The thickest metaphysical red line of thought, inconspicuous as it may appear, is obviously that of Aristotle, Suárez, Descartes, Kant and Hegel. According to Heidegger, Kant, as the most famous advocate and visible projectile of the enlightenment project, like Descartes, remains securely rooted in the same – root. Of course there are crucial matters which changed the landscape of European thinking platform between Descartes and Kant once and for all, one of them being that, no sooner than with Kant, the objectiveness of reality has changed to what we nowadays

generally understand under the objectivity of the object. For Descartes, objective reality was still permeated with the mediaeval ontology, the one of Aquinas included, where objective reality as *esse intentionale* was juxtaposed to the *realitas actualis* of outer reality. In other words, representational reality was for Descartes, as well as for Aquinas, still »only« objective reality as established/represented in the mind of the thinker, who was surrounded by the formal, actual outer reality of substances, resting in themselves, and ultimately relying on the Substance of all substances. Consider the next telling passage from Heidegger (1988, 38):

When he [Descartes] is speaking of *realitas objectiva* and *realitas actualis*, Descartes here, too, takes *realitas* in the sense mentioned above – the sense of realness or res-ness, German *Sachheit* – equivalent to the Scholastic *quidditas* {whatness, somethingness}. *Realitas objectiva* is not identical with the Kantian objective reality but just the opposite. In Descartes, *realitas objectiva* means, following Scholasticism, the objectified that which is held over against me only in pure representation. The essence of a thing, *realitas objectiva* equals possibility, *possibilitas*. In contrast, what corresponds to the Kantian concept of objective reality, or actuality, is the Cartesian Scholastic concept of *realitas actualis* – that which is actualized (*actu*). This noteworthy distinction between the Cartesian concept of *realitas objectiva* as tantamount to subjectively represented possibility and the Kantian concept of objective reality or that which is in itself, is connected with the fact that the concept of the objective [*objektive*] was turned into the exact opposite during this period. The objective, namely, that which is merely held over against me, is in Kantian and modern language subjective. What Kant calls the subjective is for the Scholastics that which lies at the basis, *hypokeimenon*, the objective, thus corresponding to the literal sense of the expression »subject«.

Later Confrontations with Descartes: Gillespie

A similar aspect of Descartes' rather inconspicuous rootedness in the mediaeval ontology has been most rewardingly revealed by the American researcher Michael Allen Gillespie, who, in his *Nihilism before Nietzsche*, discusses Descartes' debt to the nominalist upsurge in the late mediaeval period, namely that of Ockham. Again, the covert philosophical thrust at stake in Descartes is related to the *theologia rationalis* issue. In considering Descartes's onto-theology, the unpredictable and super-rational God of nominalism in Descartes's edifice of Reason turns out to be a rational and predictable God. Ultimately, according to Gillespie, the infinite and all-mighty divine will does not put the human faculty of will and power in any danger; rather, on the contrary, it enables it to assume a universal prevalence over nature. The Cartesian proof for the existence and goodness of God is unsatisfactory, because Descartes' God is powerless rather than all-powerful. Why? He has lost his inde-

pendence (*realitas actualis*) and become a mere representation in the human mind. The ungraspable almighty God of Ockham's nominalism (who can, as Descartes reiterates in numerous passages throughout his *Meditations*, be a deceiver) is thus replaced by a God who is subjected to the human notion of perfection. In order to secure the metaphysical position of the human being under the threatening horizon of the almighty (*i.e.* fundamentally whimsical, amoral) God, which ultimately leads to fathomless scepticism, Descartes planted in the human soul the very same infinite will and freedom, which proved so utterly dangerous in God (1996, 62): »As it turns out, the harmony between man and God in Descartes is grounded in the radical weakening of God and a brutal magnification of man«.

Even though Descartes attempted to build the Archimedean edifice of *mathesis universalis*, within which he would be able, as an animal rationale, to gain control over the irrational nominalist God, himself and nature as a whole, it eventually turns out that within the ground of the modern ratio there begins to flourish within reason the same irrationality Descartes so frantically sought to tame.

To summarize Gillespie's basic thrust: over Descartes' edifice of reason there hangs a jumbo poster covered with bold letters *MATHESIS UNIVERSALIS*, boldly set up against the almighty divine will. It is only because the nominalist God no longer relied on universals and the moral order of the creation that Descartes' *cogito* no longer relied on anything which had not been first of all checked by the most powerful weapon against any possible deceit: clear and distinct representation. Ontologically, or within the special metaphysics of *theologia rationalis*, the latter comes before any universals and God.

After Descartes: Transcendental Idealism and Materialism?

With all this said we can again ask ourselves what then is the purportedly undeniable philosophical thrust of the famous writer of *Meditations*? What is it that drastically changed the philosophical landscape and shifted the premodern times to modern times? What in the following passage from his first philosophy could have actually done it?

It is now some years since I detected how many were the false beliefs that I had from my earliest youth admitted as true, and how doubtful was everything I had since constructed on this basis; and from that time I was convinced that I must once for all seriously undertake to rid myself of all the opinions which I had formerly accepted, and commence to build anew from the foundation, if I wanted to establish any firm and permanent structure in the sciences.³

³ Descartes, *Meditations of First Philosophy*, Blackmasks Online 2002, p. 6.

Indeed it is possible, regardless of all that we have said so far, regardless of all historical influence unearthed here, to claim with certainty (*sic!*) that, after Descartes, it was no longer possible for philosophy to simply be premodern. In other words, all adventurers of the spirit after Descartes, including those who warned against such demonic self-confidence and thundered in favour of remaining true to the transcendent origin of it all, were no longer capable of being the advocates of transcendence without referring, explicitly or implicitly, to Descartes.

The strongest intimation at what was at stake for the future of philosophy after Descartes is his dyad of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. And as many a scholar has realized, this psycho-physicalism was the ground, from which grew the trees of both modern idealism and (atheistic) materialism or empiricism. The hardly believable coexistence of, for example, Hegel's and Wundt's thought does indeed say it all: Hegel's claim that reason is reality and reality is reason on the one hand, and Wundt's claim that thoughts are produced from the brain in the same manner as gall is produced from the bladder on the other.

When Edmund Husserl as the rightful heir of Descartes' idealistic thrust summarizes the history of modern philosophy in his *The Crisis of European Sciences*, claiming that it proves to be a dramatic and competitive intertwining of transcendentalism and objectivism, it is Descartes he is ultimately referring to. For him, the Descartes of the *cogito sum* was the pioneer of the notorious transcendental turn, while the Descartes of the psycho-physical dualism of *res cogitans* and *res extensa* turned out to be the spiritual father of objectivism, preparing the ground for the metaphysically only seemingly presupposition-less natural sciences, and with it also – lo and behold – the anti-idealistic thrust of materialism.

To corroborate this claim of the peculiar and paradoxical legacy of Descartes' philosophy, we shall shortly address the work of Denis Diderot, who was famous for his determined materialism. In his *D'Alembert's Dream*, the philosophical thrust is aimed at the very idealism advocated by Descartes. Consider the following passage, with the dialogue among doctor Bordeu, Mademoiselle de L'Espinasse and D'Alembert:

D'ALEMBERT: *What about abstractions?*

BORDEU: There aren't any. There are only habitual omissions, ellipses which make propositions more general and language faster and more convenient. They are the linguistic signs which have given birth to the abstract sciences. A quality common to several actions gave rise to the words vice and virtue, a quality common to several beings gave rise to the words ugliness and beauty. People said one man, one horse, two animals, and then later they said one,

two, three, and the whole science of numbers was born. We have no mental image of an abstract word. We have observed in all three-dimensional bodies length, width, and depth. We have busied ourselves with each of these dimensions, and from that we have derived all the mathematical sciences. All abstraction is nothing but a sign empty of an idea. All abstract science is only a combination of signs. We have excluded the mental image once we separated the sign from the physical object, and it's only by re-attaching the sign to the physical object that science becomes once again a science of ideas. That's where the need arises – so frequent in conversation and our written works – of dealing with examples. When, after a long combination of signs, you ask for an example, you are only asking the person talking to give body, form, reality, and some idea to the series of his verbal noises by linking them to some established sensations.

D'ALEMBERT: Is that clear enough for you, Mademoiselle?⁴

No matter how un-Cartesian this may sound, we cannot, and should not, mistake this powerful materialistic thrust of Diderot for something utterly different or detached from Descartes. To again address the issue of *theologia rationalis*, which bears direct influence on *psychologia rationalis* and *cosmologia rationalis*: could the enlightenment project, which turned its gaze away from the other-worldly towards the this-worldly riches in the promise of proper freedom, equality and brotherhood, have originated, and survived till this very day without Descartes' courage to be the thinking think *without relying on anything else but himself*?

Conclusion

If in the middle age paradigm God was the creator of both the human being as the thinking thing and the world, and the certainty of salvation was to be but humbly anticipated in trembling expectation, from Descartes on it is the human being who decides for and assumes the burden of the existence of himself, the world and God. The »lost link« between God and the creation can be directly surmised from the very fact that the world has been reduced to a merely extended substance, without any intrinsic value to it, i.e. without any hidden teleology (or divine reason) within it. In other words, the world has lost its majestic and wondrous properties, bestowed upon it by the Creator.

⁴ Diderot, D., *D'Alembert's Dream*, internet source: <http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/diderot/dalembertsdream.htm>

From now on, it is solely the human reason which is either capable or incapable of measuring out and providing the true reasons for what is but extended. What do we mean by this »either-or«? Interestingly enough, even though Descartes promoted a determined idealism, which later developed to the fully grown philosophical tree of transcendental philosophy (Kant, Husserl etc.), one of his many philosophical children (positivism, empiricism, realism etc.) was also Diderot's materialism, which is basically a crude form of atheism, already taking root in Descartes' hardly believable and dismissive attitude to God.

After taking seriously into account Suárez's and Heidegger's claim about the unmistakable interdependence of all three specific metaphysics, the gist of the story here would be that, after Descartes' dramatic transformation of rational theology, the two other specific metaphysics of rational psychology and rational cosmology underwent a massive and radical change as well. After the ultimate metaphysical entity had been made impotent, the world and the human being could acquire but two ontological statuses: either the world would transform into an (noematic) end result of the *a priori* intentional work of the consciousness, or the world would become a self-sufficient and indifferent material cosmos, with the »cognitive subject« fatefully lagging behind with his merely nominal, verbal, abstract, and basically impotent thrust at the ultimate material reality.

Schopenhauer was obviously right: materialism is the philosophy of the subject who forgets to take account of himself. *With this, in the modern age, the human being loses himself as the subject.* Interestingly enough, to get an even more wholesome picture of the Enlightenment project, we could push this point even further by looking at his claim from the other side: idealism is the philosophy of the subject who forgets to take account of himself cutting himself loose from the Creator and the world. *And with this, in the modern age, the human being loses the world.*

The fundamentality and necessity of the task of reconsidering Descartes' legacy to the modern world thus becomes all the more clearer: for what is at stake in rethinking the pioneer work of this great man is no less than (in materialism) the possibility of the rehabilitation of the human being in all his richness and (in idealism) the rehabilitation of the world in all its richness and – most importantly – its domesticity.

The question remains, however, whether a return to the mediaeval paradigm would suffice for this rehabilitation. With this, the present treatise comes full circle: was not the loss of the world, which comes so drastically to the fore in modern idealism, already clearly intimated in the mediaeval philosophy and its *other-worldly* aspirations? And was not the loss of the subject, patently obvious in materialism, likewise foreshadowed in the mediaeval *self-sacrifice* for the eternal bliss?

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DESCARTES, PIONIR PROSVJETITELJSTVA

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SAŽETAK: Članak se bavi osnovnim elementima Descartesove uklopljenosti u srednjovjekovnu i antičku tradiciju. Opširnije objašnjenje zajedničkih elemenata koje je Descartes dijelio sa svojim prethodnicima omogućuje nam da preciznije odredimo točku raskida u Descartesovoj misli te jasno ukazuje na njegovo neosporno naslijeđe za kasnija razdoblja, uključujući i francuski materijalizam.

Posebna pažnja posvećena je tvrdnji M. Heideggera, koja se temelji na njegovom specifičnom shvaćanju povijesti filozofije, da Descartes predstavlja paradigmatički pomak u samoshvaćanju čovjeka, koja je značajno obilježila kasniji razvoj filozofije, kako one idealističke tako i materijalističke. Još jedan autor kojega vrijedi spomenuti u ovom kontekstu je M. A. Gillespie, koji jasno prihvaća Heideggerov stav te nadalje potvrđuje kako bi se Descartesov ontološki pomak trebao sagledati sa stajališta njegove izrazito drukčije teologije.

Ključne riječi: *Descartes; prosvjetiteljstvo; metafizika; racionalna teologija; ontologija*