



Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* is not only an important turning point in Husserl's conception of phenomenology, but also in the history of phenomenology as a philosophical method, style, or movement, as it ostracized the founder of phenomenology from many of his disciples who, having been enamoured with the possibilities of phenomenology as laid out in the *Logical Investigations*, could not follow the thought down the path of transcendental idealism by way of the transcendental ego.

The relations of my own thought to that of Husserl are highly conflicted. I owe much to Heidegger, one of Husserl's prominent early disciples. Of course, it is to the Heidegger who was disillusioned with this turn in Husserl's thought, the Heidegger critical to and wary of talk of consciousness and all of its imbedded metaphysical conceptions and presuppositions, that I owe much regard. Like Heidegger, I can find interest and inspiration in the thought of the *Logical Investigations*, but with the idealist turn of the *Cartesian Meditations* I am put off by Husserl and the inanities of his persistent rationalism, as well as his blatant disregard for existence (evinced by the transcendental reduction) in favor of the objects of consciousness alone. Husserl fails to see that the \"thing itself\" cannot be grasped by consciousness, that it only captures a fraction of existence.

Husserl's thought in the *Cartesian Meditations* is akin to Derrida's issue with Husserl - it comes down to his idea of the ego or self as continually present and directly given to itself. Are we not founded upon an abyss, inundated with absence? Our concepts, our meanings, the world and all objects in the subject-object polarity relation, all of these things founded in and by the ego qua transcendental egoity, are they not grounded in and through abstraction - abstraction being an absence and a loss insofar as it produces a present gain in ideality? And then there is the ungraspable to-come which ever haunts us, reaching back into an anterior past that was never present - how is this absence that is given to the self to be comprehended as meaningful presence, to be integrated into the ego and the world of totality? We are never fully present to ourselves, even in thought. Husserl neglects to acknowledge this, focusing only on consciousness to found his system of thought. Husserl continually sets himself up to discover only what he seeks to find, disregarding what eludes conscious understanding - but such a piecemeal thought cannot stand as a utilizable foundation for any science or knowledge.

In the *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl seeks to \"reawaken the impulse of the *Cartesian Meditations*: not to adapt

their content but, in *not* doing so, to renew with greater intensity the radicalness of their spirit" (6). That is to say, Husserl seeks to, like Descartes, found science and knowledge upon the *ego cogito*, albeit through a different method, this being the phenomenological method. But no matter how radical Husserl perceives his thought as being, it remains rooted in the same faulty foundations as the meditations of Descartes - namely, the subject-object distinction and the attempt to found everything in and through the subject, which cannot but remain a vestige of abstracted existence - that is to say, in a fiction and a nothing - utterly unworkable as an absolute founding principle. Put differently, Husserl's thought is not radical enough.

How can one found science, a knowledge base, or anything for that matter, on nothing, in a groundless abyss? This is a fundamental question and problem of our existence which the *Cartesian Meditations* opens up, but ultimately fails to adequately address with its reason and its answers; the question ruptures and exceeds the capacities of reason. This fundamental problem is one which subject-object polarized thinking cannot manage, order, or reconcile. This mode of thinking, so pervasive historically up until the last century or so, fails of necessity, fated to drown in the sea of existence's boundless differences, its abyssal possibilities, its intractable motions and ruptures of which it cannot get a purchase. Rooted in the concept as well as in presence, paradoxical to its core, it cannot grasp the alterity of existence's differential flows, which flourish and proliferate through each and every singular life. Husserl never even considers that existence, outside the limits of sense, might be nonsensical, that is, otherwise than rational, and that this too demands to be thought.

The fifth meditation is the breaking point of the work, where the thought falls apart before our very eyes, evincing the fundamental failure inherent, though perhaps not adequately grasped, in the whole of the preceding parts. It has ever been the contentious point of much discussion concerning the *Cartesian Meditations*.

Husserl finds himself hung up due to his subject-object relational thinking when he is confronted with the other. The other shatters the transcendental illusion. For even understood as objectified subject, subject-as-object, or alter-ego, this Other (note the capital distinction, signifying the concept of the other, the Other, which, paradoxically, as aspect of the ego, lacks all alterity or otherness; the Other is but the Same) lacks what makes the other other - their alterity, their singularity. All the conceptual, transcendental framework of Husserl's thought abstracts from and loses the other to an empty concept. The Other, the alter-ego, is in the end a dead object; a puppet. The other can never be an alter-ego, a mirroring of my own self - this concept negates alterity in its grasping. The other can only appear as and through alterity, as absolutely other - as a void or hole in the world, a slip or blur in signification. The I and its world are shattered by the other; there is no "co-present" or "appresentation" of the other - this is but an illusion of transcendentality. This co-presence of the other with myself would have to locate itself in a nowhere, a void or a blurring - in an absence. Is a co-presence so constituted by an absence a presence at all? What would be present here but an enigma? It is precisely as this enigma, this impossible question, that the other approaches us, in an immanence which transcendentalism cannot grasp, and always ends up losing.

Of course, this is an approach to the problem of the other found in the fifth meditation from the side of my own thought. How does Husserl address, and in his opinion solve, this problem? Though Husserl finds that he can understand the being of the existent things (post reduction) by and through the *eidōs*, he struggles to account for the other, who would appear to be another ego, which thus ruptures the transcendental constitution of the world through the ego that I am as self, as embodied expression of transcendental egoity. He attempts to understand the other through a vague and underdeveloped concept of empathy, and by thinking of the other as an alter-ego, an-other I. But, as I said before, this fails to grasp the radical difference of the other's alterity. The other, even if they are granted as being an ego, cannot be understood by me (the ego) as alter-ego. For the other is absolutely different than I am - there can be no grasping of the other's thought or existence. As Derrida writes in the seemingly tautological phrase that opens up the differential possibilities of language through the rupturing of logic (this statement is no tautology; rather than saying the same it attempts to speak of difference), "*tout autre est tout autre*;" "every other is completely other," as well as "the absolute other is expressed through every single other." To comprehend the other as alter-ego is to make them into an extension of the I, of myself - they are thus nothing but an illusory other, for they find their end in the Same (another of the Hegelian resonances that ring out throughout the thought of this text, which I have until this moment remained silent concerning), with all alterity committed to oblivion - much as Husserl disregards the exigency of existence with his transcendental reduction, refusing to think or admit anything outside of consciousness, relegating such an existence to the realm of nonsense (which for him is a highly pejorative term). But nonsense requires and demands to be thought through just as much as sense. The outside demands thought just as much, if not more than, interiority. The impossible must be thought alongside the possible, if the latter is to be rendered useful or meaningful.

The close of the fifth meditation finds Husserl content, perhaps, with his solution to the problem of transcendental phenomenology as a solipsism - though his solution is hardly satisfying, seeming to be little more than a skirting around the issue of solipsism, rather than actually addressing it. It remains unsatisfactory because it fails to address the other *at all*, in that it only addresses the other in and through the ego, myself.

Transcendental idealism leads phenomenology down a dead end road; thus has it panned out historically that all of Husserl's disciples who turned away from his thought at the point of the *Cartesian Meditations*, when his thought took this idealist turn, turning away in attempts to radicalize phenomenology in a different manner, have managed to go beyond Husserl's thought (at least insofar as how it is expressed in this text). Though this work remains important in the history of phenomenology, and in the history of philosophy as a whole, it finds itself at an impasse as far as thought is concerned. Returning to the beginning of the work, we find that though Husserl sought to radicalize Cartesian philosophy by combining its methods with those of phenomenology, in the he has failed to escape the solipsistic fate of his predecessor; shipwrecked on the limits of his own skull, so to speak; the approach of the other, of any other, of any thing, being enough to bring the entire edifice of his well-wrought system of thought crashing down, fragmented into pieces, ever to remain irreparable and dead.

With his *Cartesian Mediations* Husserl offers a superb introduction into phenomenology and what we may call the hermeneutics of the real. Building upon the Cartesian cogito and meditations, Husserl offers us a new way of looking at reality and gives us the living world, an immediacy beyond the techno-scientific immediacy we are use to (themes which he furthermore worked out in his *Crisis*). More than anything however, Husserl's *Meditations* show a strong influence of Leibniz' *Monadology*, as the Cartesian ego finds transformation into the monad.

In my opinion, Husserl was a fantastic philosopher (and I would take this little book before [Being and Time](#) any day). True to the name of this work, Husserl is working firmly within the Cartesian tradition. Like Descartes, he starts off by doubting everything that can be doubted and, like Descartes, he gets down to his own ego. However, from that point on, his philosophy differs markedly. Descartes, after affirming his own existence, turns to scholastic logical proofs to rebuild the exterior world. Husserl, instead, brackets the world, following through with the impetus that Descartes abandoned after the first step.

Husserl ends up with a philosophy that is remarkably similar to cognitive psychology in some ways, but differing in its profoundly introspective orientation. He examines his consciousness in extreme detail, interrogating various processes that normally operate in the background, and bringing them to the fore. He takes the best ideas from Kant, Hegel, Locke, Descartes, and Leibniz, weaves them into a coherent whole, and ends up with a genuinely novel and compelling philosophical system. System is the key word here, as Husserl is, if anything, systematic, organized, and thorough. This book, although brief, is quite an intellectual chore to get through. His sentences display the usual German flair for longevity and prolixity, and he may set some sort of record for subordinate clauses.

At the same time it's true that what I care most about in philosophy grows more or less directly out of Husserl. Speaking of my own personal triumvirate, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, and Ricoeur would all be inconceivable without Husserl. (Happily, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, M-P makes short work of the reduction, dispensing with it by the end of the preface.) *Phenomenology* greatly expands the areas of human experience amenable to rigorous philosophical investigation. This is true even if Husserl himself stayed within a fairly limited framework of epistemological questions.

I took a few notes as I read this book:

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"That the being of the world 'transcends' consciousness ... and that it necessarily remain transcendent, in no wise alters the fact that it is conscious life alone wherein everything transcendent becomes constituted" - pp 62

As I think this passage indicates, there's no getting around the enormous amount of tension internal to Husserl. Reading secondary literature you'll notice incredible disagreement about basic aspects of his philosophy. For instance, was he a strict realist or radical idealist? Possibly he was just more scrupulous and honest than most everyone else. Where most other philosophers find a need take a stance on basic issues in order to then formulate their own doctrine, Husserl was constantly circling back to reopen old wounds.

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"The attempt to conceive the universe of true being as something lying outside the universe of possible consciousness, possible knowledge, possible evidence, the two being related to another merely exterenally by a rigid law, is nonsensical" - pp 84

For much of Husserl's career, neo-Kantianism was the main philosophical rival to phenomenology. This passage can be read as a swipe at the Kantian thing-in-itself or noumenal realm. In Husserl's view, Kant constructed obscure concepts where what was needed was a more rigorous clarification of the content of experience.

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page 97 - discussion of kinesthetic sensation and the 'I can' - this would be the starting point for Merleau-Ponty; where Husserl keeps bumping into the body almost accidentally, always from the perspective of the ego, M-P would make the body the explicit theme of his own investigations right from the beginning

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Okay, here's where he gets Leibnizian: "the constitution of the world essentially involves a 'harmony' of the monads" (pp 108), but then he quickly goes on to say he's not making anything up: "This is not meant, however, as a 'metaphysical' hypothesizing of monadic harmony, any more than the monads themselves are metaphysical inventions or hypotheses" (ibid).

Even when he starts to stray into the wildly metaphysical territory of Leibniz, Husserl insists that phenomenology remains a kind of empiricism, a patient description or explication of the phenomena of experience. Yet one may wonder whether he's barking up the wrong tree by looking to consciousness for the foundations of the objective and cultural world.

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Section 55, pages 120 to 128 - alright, now things are getting reallllly complicated.

Husserl wishes to show that I do not infer the existence of another based on external evidence, as Descartes and the classic empiricists would claim, but that I apprehend the other directly as another - "What I actually see is not a sign and not a mere analogue, a depiction in the natural sense of the world; on the contrary, it is someone else" (pp 124)

And yet Husserl remains committed to showing how the other is constituted in me. Later on, arguably, this would change as the 'lifeworld' became a prominent category in his thought, but for the Cartesian Meditations he is unabashedly committed to a philosophy of the ego. The apotheosis of the ego, but also maybe the point at which the ego is pushed to the fucking brink.

Scholastic philosophers complained that Descartes asked some really silly questions, and indeed who could say there were wrong. Solipsism is an artificial problem that only arises once you've committed to a certain type of ego-centric philosophizing. It seems unlikely there has ever been a totally consistent solipsist in the history of humanity (even extreme cases of autism or sociopathy really are not the same thing). Nonetheless, since Descartes it has been a problem to which philosophers must return obsessively.

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Thus the idea of an all-embracing philosophy becomes actualized – quite differently than Descartes and his age, guided by modern natural science, expected: Not as an all-embracing system of deductive theory, as though everything that exists were included in the unity of a computation, but – with a radical alteration of the fundamentally essential sense of all science – as a system of phenomenological disciplines, which treat correlative themes and are ultimately grounded, not on an axiom, ego cogito, but on an all-embracing self-investigation. "In other words: The path leading to a knowledge absolutely grounded in the highest sense, or (this being the same things) a philosophical knowledge, is necessarily the path of universal self-knowledge – first of all monadic, and then intermonadic. We can say also that a radical and universal continuation of Cartesian meditations, or (equivalently) a universal self-cognition, is philosophy itself and encompasses all self-accountable science. "The Delphic motto, "Know thyself!" has gained a new signification. Positive science is a science lost in the world. I must lose the world by epoché in order to regain it by a universal self-examination. "Do not wish to go out out", says Augustine, "go back into yourself. Truth dwells in the inner man." (pp. 156-57)

With these three paragraphs Edmund Husserl ends his *Cartesian Meditations* (1929). The book itself is the product of three lectures he gave in Paris on his phenomenological method. Both the lectures and the accompanying book count among the last works Husserl wrote and published, so naturally we see here a fully developed form of his phenomenology that differs in certain important respects from his earlier views. The book also is the most comprehensive and comprehensible account of phenomenology that Husserl wrote. And last but not least, the book offers – or so Husserl claims – solutions to problems which earlier works, particularly *Ideas I* (1913) didn't solve.

The three paragraphs mentioned above capture the spirit of *Cartesian Meditations* as well the core of Husserl's conception of phenomenology – as transcendental idealism – by the end of his career. Short remarks on each of the parts of these three paragraphs will summarize this work perfectly.

Descartes founded a new way of doing philosophy: by introspection (doubting, critical analysis, etc.) he found consciousness (ego cogito) to be the indubitable basis of the rest of the world. But, according to Husserl, Descartes

didn't see the deep, fundamental implications of his own critical reflections and got tricked into focussing solely on the 'ego cogito' and taking the 'ego sum' for granted. Husserl travels back to the Cartesian meditations but then focusses on the existing ego, instead of the thinking ego.

The goal of both philosophers is the same: finding a self-evident a priori foundation which guarantees the truth of all the rest of the sciences and practical life. But focusing on the ego as a thinking thing, tricks you into approaching the world, reality, as somehow being mathematically connected and thus deductively intelligible. This, then, leads to the Cartesian metaphor of the tree of knowledge, where first philosophy plays the part of trunk and all the different sciences are united in the fact that they're all different branches of the same trunk.

Husserl rejects this view altogether. For him, there is a multitude of worlds – the worlds of our everyday practical life, the worlds of the different sciences, the world of logic, the worlds of culture, etc. All these are different objectivities, different realities, and in principle existentially unconnected to each other. In all these worlds, we assume the existence of these worlds and all the things that make them up, but this is a primordial naïveté according to Husserl.

The first step in finding the true essence of all these worlds is by putting these worlds and their objects out of order. We should reduce our consciousness of the world to 'consciousness of' and study it in all its appearances. That is, how does seeing an object, touching it, remembering it, etc. appear to us, as consciousness.

The next step is to describe these appearances in their full detail. Doing so will reveal the intentionality of all our conscious acts. That is, every time we are conscious of something this act always intends the object of this act. When we remember an old friend, our remembering is one part and our remembered friend – as intentional object – is another part. The two sides cannot exist in isolation – when we are conscious we are always conscious of something.

By describing all these conscious acts, preferably all sorts of different acts and objects, we grasp certain fundamental essential structures. It is these structures, these essences, Husserl is after. For him, they are what consciousness is. Since we have put the objective, real world out of order, we are dealing with a realm of unreal things. That is, the structures that form the essence of our pure consciousness are transcendental – in the sense that they are radically different from the world. This is why Husserl calls this the sphere of the Transcendental Ego. (This is not to be confused with the psychological ego, personal identity, subjectivity, etc. which are all part of the real world.)

In this realm of the Transcendental Ego we are dealing with ideas (in the Platonic sense – universal essences) as opposed to the objectivities of reality. It is important to understand what this means: Husserl here claims that we are primarily and primordially monads – self-enclosed entities that contain self-evident, a priori, universal knowledge. Now, part of this primordial realm of ideas, are my experiences of Alter Ego's. That is, in this original and primordial world I encounter other beings that are monadic, self-contained. I cannot create those so the logical conclusion is that they are already there, part of the primordial world. In effect, this means a community of Ego's exists in a primordial sense – prior to the empirical world.

Each Ego is a 'Here' and the experienced Alter Ego is a 'There'. The interconnectedness of these Ego's in their original community already implies a primordial World, since here-there is a spatial form – objective space. Also, since each Ego is an infinite stream of consciousness of subjectivities and objectivities, i.e. temporal succession; and since these Ego's are interconnected in this primordial World; their original community implies an objective time.

Husserl thus ends up, through the phenomenological reduction of finding a primordial community of Transcendental Ego's whose essential interconnectedness implies an Objective World.

Now, the final step can be filled in pretty easily. All the earlier mentioned worlds – of practical life, of the different sciences, of logic, of ethics, of religion, of culture, etc. – are thus, ultimately, constitutions by the Transcendental Ego. That is, our essence as Ego's – the a priori and self-evident structures underlying all our experiencing – serve as both the form all conceivable worlds as well as the realizations of these conceivable worlds.

It is this constitution, underlying all our experiences in the world, that is covered up in our everyday life-world. We simply experience things and people and take them for granted. Intuitively we feel a deep mystery of their status and thus proceed to study them empirically, i.e. scientifically and logically. We build incredible scientific structures on these empirical experiences, but the mystery remains. That is because we are naïve – only by self-reflecting on our consciousness of these experiences can we overcome this naïveté. So, ultimately, we see Husserl applying a Kantian

criticism of consciousness (as pure consciousness – cut loose from the empirical world) in order to overcome the Cartesian problems of the thinking ego.

So when Husserl, in the final paragraph of the Cartesian Meditations invokes the Delphic motto ‘Know Thyself!’ he means it in the strictest sense. For him, all the sciences and all aspects of our daily life, are lost in the world – unfounded, unconnected. Only when we cut ourselves off from this world and retreat into the workings of our inner consciousness can we find a solid bedrock. Only then can we return to the world and lay all of our different experiences on this uncovered, rock hard foundation. And these self-criticisms transcend our personal existence as Ego in a very profound way: we stumble upon essential and necessary structures that are universally applicable.

Now, I have to admit that I find this view on human consciousness and the fundamental role it plays in basically everything both fascinating and beautiful as well as slightly obsessive. To me Husserl’s whole project seems like a radicalized intellectual autism: everything and everyone ultimately springs from my own transcendental experiences. And somehow this guarantees both the truth and the interconnectedness of everything and everyone. It is Hegel all over again: the world as somehow being a product of consciousness, of course the consciousness of the meditator, i.e. Husserl. The shaky concept of intersubjectivity seems to have been invented only to get out of this solipsistic loop.

Also, Husserl’s view on the Transcendental Ego as somehow being an infinite immaterial (irreal) essential entity which is indestructible and all-influential seems fishy to me. He seems to hanker to a soul a little bit too much. It is known Husserl was a devout Protestant and I think his religious views shine through in his radicalization of phenomenology into a Transcendental Idealism – as opposed to his earlier views. (It is interesting to note that Husserl’s intersubjectivity, as a means to overcome the inevitable solipsism of his phenomenology, was developed late in his career as well.)

Anyway, I don’t agree with Husserl’s Transcendental Idealism being a productive route to find truth or live life. I do find it a beautiful picture of the world and the way Husserl treats of consciousness and the infinite realm of conscious acts is very insightful. It definitely is a welcome antidote to both naïve empiricism and the all too human tendency to lose oneself in the everyday life of doing and acting. But I can clearly see why Martin Heidegger chose to shift his attention to this latter (everyday existence) and why both Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, although using Husserl’s phenomenological method, decided to incorporate a lot of Heideggerian viewpoints and concepts in their works. Husserl is simply too intellectual for any philosophical account of human existence or particular aspects of it (e.g. our body).

And on that note, let me end this review by stating I cannot really recommend Husserl as an author nor any of his works in particular. I guess Cartesian Meditations is one of his most accessible works, but since it is one of his final works and thus develops many earlier ideas, I have doubts about how fruitful such an investment of time and effort is. But studying Husserl, although brutally challenging, does offer many fruitful, insightful and beautiful experiences.

Husserl is the father of phenomenology, and while his writing is plodding and at times difficult to read (his work is based on lecture notes), his insights have proved revolutionary. For example, it is in response to Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology that Martin Heidegger develops existential phenomenology, from which the existentialism movement takes its roots - see Heidegger’s [Being and Time](#) and Sartre’s [Being and Nothingness](#).

Cartesian Ego: subject of pure cogitation. All principles are innate in the pure Ego.

Evidence: it is an experiencing of something that is, and is thus. It is a mental seeing.

Epoche: the radical method by which I apprehend myself purely

Transcendental Heading: Ego Cogito. Each conscious process means something or other and bears with it its own cogitatum. The ego is concrete only in the "endlessly open universality of his connectedly unitary intentional life" (38).

Intentionality: thoughts are always thoughts about something.

Transcendental Time: "every subjective process has its own internal temporality" (41). If we take an object as it appears to us, we have to distinguish between the objective temporality that appears from the internal temporality of

its appearing (this is our perceiving of it, as it "flows away"). Our consciousness takes the two temporalities into a synthetic unity. What I think Husserl is trying to do is allow for both subjectivity and objectivity. The knowing subject, a la Kant, is always operative, yet that doesn't negate the inherent objectivity of a thing.

internal time: subjective processes.

Consciousness of internal time: modes of temporal appearance; multiplicities.

3rd Meditation

Our investigation of phenomenal constitution is the constitution of any intentional object. All evidence is experienced in a maximally broad, yet unitary sense. In other words, we experience sense data in a manifold way, yet we do have a coherent "grip" on it.

4th Meditation

Husserl nicely defines some of his terms for us.

Ego: Leibnizian monad.

Abstracted perception: pure eidos

Eidos: a beholdable universal.

The culmination of Cartesian Dualism, phenomenology, brought about an end to epistemological philosophy in general, which sucks. Perhaps Kant, and therefore Hume, is to blame. Either way reading Husserl, and Heidegger's reaction to his philosophy, is sad. The combination of intellectual curiosity and integrity died with men such as these.