

SUBJECTIVITY AND THE ENCOUNTER WITH BEING

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I

In the 17th century, René Descartes revolutionized metaphysics with six short meditations on the nature of subjectivity, reality and God. Certainly the groundwork for the insights contained within this work must have been implicitly laid down much earlier within ancient and medieval thought. Nonetheless, the meditations are understood as a metaphysical endeavor in “first philosophy”, and the particular manner in which Descartes achieved this end served as the precise point of differentiation between the account of being there given and the history of metaphysical thought that preceded it. Within this work, subjectivity and consciousness are for the first time established as a *primary* concern for metaphysics. This arose on the basis of the Cartesian discovery of the ego, the *I think* at bottom to the encounter with being, which is further interpreted from the perspective of a phenomenal world that has been cast into doubt in regards to its being. Although the primary aim of these meditations was to provide a more firm foundation for metaphysics, history tells us another story. So Kant would later question the possibilities of metaphysics on the basis of what was, in principle, a Cartesian foundation. Kant likewise concluded that subjectivity, rather than serving as the door into being, instead serves as an impenetrable obstacle to knowledge of things themselves. Far from obtaining a more firm foundation, metaphysics was instead deemed impossible.

To this day, we still philosophize beneath the great shadow of Kant’s judgment. That is not to say that metaphysics is not practiced, for indeed it is and there are both now and have been within the history of philosophy since Kant a number of noteworthy metaphysicians. What is nonetheless troublesome is the fact that subjectivity is still very much seen as a terrible impasse impeding metaphysical progress. In consequence, we no longer speak of being as such but only being in relation to the subject. The reduction of metaphysics to subjectivity is likewise evident within the premier works of 19th and 20th century thought—from the Kantian a priori, to the Hegelian absolute where being and nothing are collapsed within thought into a single concept-

synthesis, to Heidegger's renewal of the question of being which, although cognizant and even critical of the Cartesian turn, nonetheless resolves being into the subject's dispositional stances of being-there (*Dasein*). In each case, the classical Aristotelian idea of a science of being is either rejected or transformed into post-metaphysical forms of critical or relational ontology.¹

Classically construed, metaphysics was understood as the science of being as being. The repetition *as being* further served to indicate the aspect according to which this science was thought to study its subject matter. It is inherently reflective (*reflexio*). But it is not only reflective in the sense in which *x is x* involves reflection. As a product of the human encounter with being, metaphysics both includes subjectivity but was likewise thought to transcend the subject on the basis of the human reflective capacity to "double back" upon itself in thinking, as it were, to reflect upon the nature of its own encounter.

That metaphysics should be founded upon an act of reflection ought not to be surprising. Indeed, we discover reflection first among the ancient philosophers as, for example, Socrates who establishes self-examination as a primary concern for the thinker.² Within Plato, reflection is central to the possibilities inherent in knowledge of the Good and the intellectual ascent into the intelligible realm. So within the allegory of the cave, the prisoners are first completely immersed in a world of appearances.³ The shadows upon the wall are said to preoccupy the prisoners who are in turn embedded in the life of the body, of being in the world and being-directed toward objects without consideration of the metaphysical ground of such objects. Suddenly there is an awakening, which is to say, the awakening into reflection. A prisoner is forced to stand up, to turn around (as a doubling back) and to gaze upon the light of the fire. Even as the eyes of the prisoner are pained by that light, he is nonetheless forced (for after all, the allegory is about the nature of education) to make the ascent to the surface and into knowledge, where, following an arduous process of acclimation to the brilliance of the light of the sun, there is finally a vision of the sun itself. Far from a static possession of facts, the vision of the sun, here a symbol for the Good, is interpreted once again as a complete turning of the

¹ Among contemporary speculative realists, including Ray Brassier, Ian Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman, etc., what is here called "relational ontology" is termed "correlationism", as first coined by Quentin Meillassoux in *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), 5.

² Plato, *Apology* 38a.

³ Plato, *Republic* 514a-521e.

organ of knowing in such a way that knowledge of that which is *reflects* back upon the knower and is transformed into self-knowledge.⁴

If we consider further the works of Aristotle, we find that in spite of the extant differences between these two thinkers, a likeness of foundation is yet discernible. In the first place, there are the four causes (*aitiai*) wherein the final cause culminates in a reaching out toward the Good as the aim and end of all human desire and action. Metaphysics is also called wisdom (*sophia*) and through contemplation (*theoria*), wisdom is reckoned within the *Nichomachean Ethics* as the supreme source of human well-being.⁵ Although Aristotle considers the heights of wisdom in many ways unattainable, as the sole possession of the gods, he nonetheless urges on pursuit of this science. Finally, contemplation entails reflection, and in Aristotle's characterization of the prime mover within the twelfth book of the *Metaphysics* according to the notion of thought thinking itself (*noesis noeseos*), we discover reflection expressed in its highest and most complete form.⁶

That Aristotle should later characterize metaphysics as the science of being *as being* follows almost naturally from the very aims of wisdom. For how else are we to attain to the universal and objective perspective with respect to the *truth* of being if there is not a like subjective context according to which such a perspective is expressed? Reflection and the desire to know emerge as the foundation of metaphysical inquiry. On the other hand, from the perspective of the immersion of consciousness within the life of the body, the higher metaphysical and quite transcendent standpoint could never be achieved.

What is in consequence required is a *retrieval* of the classical Aristotelian conception of metaphysics. First and foremost such retrieval involves reaffirmation of the possibilities of metaphysics as a science in the broader sense of an objective and systematic body of knowledge about being. Since Descartes, the history of thinking about being, far from metaphysics, emphasizes instead relational forms of ontology inasmuch as the subject now takes center stage in the account of being. From such a perspective, there is no longer a scientific study of being as being but at best descriptive analysis of being in relation to me, as it were, being for a subject. This is a fundamental addition that leads to an entirely separate domain of inquiry—one that we

⁴ So in the *Republic* (508e), Plato speaks of the Good as bestowing both truth and the power of knowing to the knower.

⁵ Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* 1178b8.

⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1074b30-35.

do not here censure but only seek to isolate from metaphysics proper.

For over two centuries metaphysics has suffered serious and in many ways irrecoverable damage on account of confusion and critique. Despite this, the science of being remains, awaiting further development, the foundations of which having first been laid down by Aristotle and the scholastics. The *positive* retrieval of metaphysics inevitably demands a detailed process of historical analysis, a process that we can never hope to fully achieve within a single “commentary” on this problem. Despite this, it is our hope that the efforts here made will serve as an initial starting point toward such retrieval.

II

Although Cartesian thought represents the springboard for the later transformation of metaphysics into relational ontology, within Kant that transformation is developed in its most complete form. Indeed, the Kantian a priori severed the relationship between appearance and reality and in Kant the transcendent nature of being takes on an entirely new status. So the term “transcendence” finds its origin in the Latin *transcendentalis*, related to *transcendens*, the latter formed from the combination of *trans-* “across” and *-scandere* “to climb”. Transcendence involves an ascent that crosses over into something other in the sense of reaching past, surpassing and surmounting. Although the philosophical usage of this term finds its origin among the scholastics, the actual expression seems to have been popularized by Kant.⁷ Prior to Kant, the Latin *transcendens* was used in reference to and as a characterization for being (*ens*), insofar as being was thought to soar above all differences. A similar view was early on expressed by Aristotle within the *Metaphysics* in recognition of the fact that any and every difference added to being must itself be some thing, for which reason he concluded that being cannot be a genus.⁸ He further noted that being (*to on*) and the one (*to hen*) are coextensive, inasmuch as the subject remains undifferentiated in the transition from *x is* to *x is one*.⁹ The scholastics later added to this the doctrine of transcendentals, viz., that not only are being and

⁷ See Jan Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental thought: From Philip the Chancellor (CA. 1225) To Francisco Suárez* (Leiden: Brill 2012), 13-15. Apparently John Duns Scotus was the first to speak of metaphysics as “transcendental science”, e.g., see Simo Knuuttila, “The Metaphysics of the Categories in John Duns Scotus,” in *Categories of Being: Essays on Metaphysics and Logic*, ed. Leila Haaparanta & Heikki J. Koskinen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 62-77.

⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 998b23, 1059b33.

one convertible (*ens et unum convertuntur*) but also truth (*verum*), goodness (*bonum*), and something (*aliquid*).¹⁰ These were likewise all referred to beneath the general heading “transcendentalis”.

Later on, through the influence of Kant, the term “transcendental” assumed an entirely different meaning. So in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant rejected these scholastic doctrines and further reduced the Aristotelian categories to a priori concepts of pure understanding which he characterized as the: “logical requirements and criteria of all *knowledge* of things in general”.¹¹ Even as Kant rejected these scholastic notions, he nonetheless retained the term “transcendental” on account of the recognizable affinity between the old usage of this term and his own application on the basis of the a priori conditions of experience in general. But what is far more interesting is that conscious reflection is once more brought in for the purpose of explanation of the basis of our knowledge of such transcendental conditions of experience. This can be seen in examination of his discussion of both the peculiar way in which we discover the concepts of pure understanding in contradistinction to the method of pure reason as well as the source of the unity of consciousness brought forth upon the basis of transcendental apperception.

So in the second edition to the *Critique* in *The Amphiboly of Concepts of Reflection*, we read the following: “Reflection (*reflexio*)”, Kant asserts, “does not concern itself with objects themselves with a view to deriving concepts from them directly”, but instead to, “the state of mind in which we first set ourselves to discover the subjective conditions under which [alone] we are able to arrive at concepts.”¹² In other words, the primary concern of reflection is the a priori *form* of experience as opposed to the a posteriori *content* or matter of it. We might in turn say that reflection looks to the transcendental conditions of our experience.

Kant further analyzes the nature of the reflective act itself, noting that this act involves a consideration of: “*identity and difference, of agreement and opposition, of the inner and the outer, and finally of the determinable and the determination (matter and form).*”¹³ The dialectic

⁹ Ibid. 1003b27.

¹⁰ See Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 1, a. 1. On other accounts, beauty is likewise included as a transcendental. See, e.g., Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974) and more recently Alice Ramos, *Dynamic Transcendentals: Truth, Goodness and Beauty from a Thomistic Perspective* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012).

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (Boston/New York: Macmillan & Co., 1965), B114.

¹² Ibid. B316.

¹³ Ibid. B317.

that here emerges is determined to be a fundamental offspring of the act of reflection. Kant further proceeds to distinguish *logical reflection*, at bottom comparative in nature, from *transcendental reflection*, said to involve consideration of “the objects themselves” which further, “contains the ground of possibility of the objective comparison of representations with each other”.¹⁴ As such, for Kant, transcendental reflection upon the a priori conditions of experience serves as a basis for logical reflection upon experience that follows from this.¹⁵

In other passages within the *Critique*, Kant emphasizes the reflective dimension at ground to the deduction of the pure concepts. He further distinguishes the method of understanding from that of pure reason: “Whatever we may have to decide as to the possibility of the concepts derived from pure reason”, he asserts within the opening paragraph to the Transcendental Dialectic, “it is at least true that they are not obtained by mere reflection but only by inference.” He goes on to distinguish such concepts or ideas of reason from the concepts of pure understanding, adding that these latter: “contain nothing but the unity of reflection upon phenomena.”¹⁶ Two points stand out in relation to this distinction. First, the pure concepts are again discoverable through an act of reflection and so appear in relation to the reflective and quite transcendental “state of mind” that considers the conditions of this encounter. Second, actual metaphysical inquiry, through pure reason, no longer involves reflection but instead inference. This is an essential point. Following Kant’s analysis, the foundations of metaphysics depends upon the *way* in which we experience the world, and we can only know this through reflective consideration of the conditions of our experience. On the other hand, metaphysics in its actuality (as practiced) involves rational (inferential) speculation that follows upon the reflective act of discovery.

Along with the pure concepts of understanding, the problem of the unity of consciousness is likewise resolved through the act of reflection. This can be seen in Kant’s account of transcendental apperception wherein a distinction is formed between the empirical ego as

¹⁴ Ibid. B318.

¹⁵ One of the interesting results of Kant’s analysis here has to do with the immediate influence it would exert upon the thought of the later German Idealists that followed and in particular in relation to Hegelian dialectic. So within the *Science of Logic*, although Hegel rejects the static manner in which Kant determines the pure concepts, he nonetheless adopts the very same *reflective* determination as the core foundation of dialectical idealism. Although Hegel likewise confounds thinking and being, his use of reflection is of particular interest if we consider the fact that in many ways Hegel considered his own thought as following within the direct lineage of Aristotle who himself gave priority to reflection with respect to metaphysical thinking.

¹⁶ Ibid. A310/B367.

immanent within consciousness and the transcendental ego as the unifying principle at ground to consciousness. So in the Transcendental Deduction within the first edition to the *Critique*, Kant denies access to the ego a posteriori insofar as: “No fixed and abiding self can present itself in this flux of inner appearances.”¹⁷ Following this, he nonetheless affirms the necessity of an a priori unifying principle at bottom to the various representations of experience on account of the fact that experience finds a focal point in the subject of experience. So as the manifold of appearances are referred to a focal point, viz., the transcendental ego, to that extent the ego has: “before its eye the identity of its act, whereby it subordinates all synthesis of apprehension (which is empirical) to a transcendental unity, thereby rendering possible their interconnection to *a priori* rules.”¹⁸ For this reason, Kant suggests that appearances “all belong to me” and are “mine”. He further adds that appearances find unity in and through the ego insofar as they are all referred to a single “self-consciousness”.¹⁹ In effect, although Kant will later deny knowledge of the substance of the ego, he nonetheless affirms knowledge of the referential relations that hold between appearances and the transcendental ego as the focal point of those appearances.

At this point we might pause in order to consider the precise nature of this knowledge. For even if we reject the Kantian a priori, we nonetheless discover, as Kant has pointed out, that experience retains a specific *subjective character*, which is to say, involves the specific addition of consciousness over and above experience.²⁰ What Kant has likewise shown is that from the perspective of consciousness, the objects of experience are reinterpreted as appearances that are now said to be *for an ego*. Through reflection, we not only discover a separate domain of knowledge, but in the dialectic that unfolds from this, we obtain the ground of possibility for determining what does and does not belong properly to subjectivity itself. Reflection reveals a distinction between being for a subject and being apart from the subject. This shall then be the perspective according to which the proper foundation of metaphysics shall here be determined, viz., by way of reflective analysis of the relational structures inherent in consciousness and

¹⁷ Ibid. A107.

¹⁸ Ibid. A108.

¹⁹ Ibid. B134. The full text states: “The thought that the representations given in intuition one and all belong to me, is therefore equivalent to the thought that I unite them in one self-consciousness, or can at least so unite them; and although this thought is not itself the consciousness of the *synthesis* of the representations, it presupposes the possibility of that synthesis. In other words, only insofar as I can grasp the manifold of the representations in one consciousness, do I call them one and all *mine*. For otherwise I should have as many-coloured and diverse a self as I have representations of which I am conscious to myself.”

²⁰ This notion of subjective character is here derived from Thomas Nagel, “What it is Like to Be a Bat,” in *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 2 (Oct. 1974): 435-450.

experience.

III

In the order of consciousness and experience, what is prior and first? Initially, we might answer that the life of the ego is first inasmuch I know myself more than my own body and indeed I know myself best as thinking. But if we consider the initial state of consciousness that the child first awakens to within the womb and at birth, what is first is never the life of ego, the life of thinking, but instead the life of the body. Thinking follows after the life of the body. Before thought, there is first sensation and perception through which we are inundated with innumerable objects and their properties. We experience pain and pleasure, can feel and at times hear the rhythmic pulse of our heart. Our skin brushes up against our surroundings and our legs and body press against the ground. We further perceive other bodies in the world, both close at hand and at a distance. Through the life of the body we thereafter discover that *I think*, but it is never the other way around. We do not think and then discover the body. Rather, we are embodied and then we discover thinking.

The life of the body is in consequence first on the order of experience. As embodied, the ego lives within the life of the body, interacting with the world and with other bodies. Within this state, the ego does not initially recognize and differentiate itself from its life within the body. The ego feels, perceives, wants, and when it thinks, it thinks through the life of the body. For the embodied ego, I and my body are one.

But the life of the body, of embodiment, is not the only life lived by the ego. The ego has instead a life of its own, even as it is tied to the body. This is immediately evident in examination of the *value* we place upon our own bodies inasmuch as it is never the body itself that is first and foremost valued, but instead the life of the ego in the body. So we tend to the health of the body for the sake of the ego that lives through the body. Still more, far from being just the body, within great illness, disease or bodily misfortune, the ego learns to despise the body. Suddenly the body becomes a weight that mercilessly suffocates the ego. We in turn recognize that we are *bound* to our body and through our body compelled to attend to the life of the body, regardless of will or desire. As such, the health, sustenance and continuance of the life of the body is held as something altogether precious insofar as another life, both tied to while yet

entirely its own, thrives within and through the body.

Pleasure and in particular pain further reveal that we are more than just the life of our body. We might formulate arguments in proof of the non-existence of the ego, but beneath the power of pain we quickly forget such arguments and learn to know of the ego. Pain penetrates through the body and into the ego. The inquisitor is well aware of this—with his sharp knife he draws forth the ego from its hiding place in the body as skillfully as the surgeon draws a splinter from the eye. Where the endurance of pain reaches a limit there the ego stands forth and pronounces that the body and the life of the body has become for it a source of terrible oppression, and so to be rid of the body becomes its sole hope.

In consequence, such a denial of the life of the body testifies to the fact that we are more than just our own body. Within pain, I will to be beyond my body. Human experience thus extends beyond the body and discovers the ego at the core of consciousness. For we fear first and foremost not the cessation of the life of the body, but the life of the ego. I might lose a part of my body, but so long as I remain, I feel somewhat satisfied. On the other hand, the loss of the life of the ego—thinking, hoping, judging, etc., appears to me as a far deeper and more penetrating death. I might accept the death of the body coupled with the continued life of my ego, but never the death of the ego coupled with the continued life of the body. From this we might conclude that although the body is first on the order of experience, the ego is first on the order of consciousness.

Recognition of the separate life of the ego implies an act on an entirely different order. Such recognition implies not only awareness of self in the sense of self-awareness, but recognition of the whole order of the self. The ego must, in a way, extricate itself from the life of the body in such a way that, even as it is tied to the body, it views the body and embodied experience as if from above. That such a higher standpoint of consciousness is possible is evident from the fact that, even as we undergo an experience, we may view that experience objectively, as though an outsider. I might warm my hands before a fire, or feel the cold, powdery sensation of snow. Alternatively, as I experience warmth and cold, I may likewise stand apart and examine myself experiencing. From this latter perspective, the ego disengages itself from the undergoing of experience and now views its own body and embodied experience as an object. Within such a state we might speak of the ego as itself disembodied insofar as it no longer properly undergoes as embodied, but as though apart from it. This conscious act according to which the ego

separates itself from the life of the body is here called *reflection*.

It is important to note that although we use such terms as disembodied, disengaged, outside, apart, independent, isolated, etc., all in reference to the reflecting ego, the ego is never properly speaking separate from the body. Such terms apply not to the substance of the ego but instead to the perspective according to which the ego views itself. As will be explained further below, the ego is not an independent entity but a relational focal point within consciousness. Although we never discover this focal point *directly* within consciousness, experience is nonetheless referred to that focal point in each case and for this reason we *indirectly* know of our own ego. Still more, through the act of reflection, the ego stands apart as though separate from the body in the sense that we cease to undergo, cease to be within the immediacy of experience and now view experience as a relation. We dialectically separate what belongs to the ego from what does not belong to me and from this obtain a standpoint for assessing what is proper to each. From this, a new recognition and judgment follows, and it is through this judgment, as will be seen, that metaphysics finds its foundation.

IV

Taking into account the separate life of the ego, it is plain that experience is never just of an array of impressions falling upon a hollow wooden horse, as Plato once recognized.²¹ Such a view implies the absence of any unifying principle at bottom to this encounter, and so the absence of the ego as one who abides along with and as an inherent condition of experience. It further brings to mind the projector. A projector projects an image upon the screen. The images themselves are posited outward, in a purely object-oriented perspective. But the projector never internalizes the perception of the image. The image is but a mere projection and the projector the medium for it. On the other hand, every experiential encounter with being involves internalization of that encounter. There is added to the encounter the subject and ego, as one *for whom* there is said to be an encounter. In a word, what has been projected upon the screen of consciousness is internalized from the perspective of the ego itself.

Now every identifiable object of experience is brought forth from within and out of the whole background of our encounter with being as such. On the other hand, that whole is never in

²¹ Plato, *Theaetetus* 184d.

itself given as object, but is at best only implicit within any one encounter. We obtain in consequence a specific restriction. Experience of an object involves always an encounter with some determinate object. This is evident in our normal everyday dealings with entities. As I walk along the streets of New York, I encounter people, cars, buildings, clouds, the sun, and so on. In each case, my relationship to the objects of this experience arises according to the restriction that I encounter some determinate object or finite collection of objects.

A second restriction presents itself. Every object of experience involves a relation to me as the experiencing subject. Take the following example. My intention this evening is to go to the theater. I'm late and now searching for my keys. The keys were in my pocket but are now gone. Here we might of course imagine that by some miracle my keys have vanished into thin air, but naturally the thought of such a possible transgression of the physical laws of nature never occurs to me. I am instead immersed in the embodied experience of searching for my keys. I go into the bedroom, look beneath the couch, on the table and then finally, turning toward the door see my keys sitting within the keyhole.

At which point, we might ask, am I not in this encounter? As I recall each moment, I first discover *myself* fiddling for the keys in my pocket, then *I* am looking in the bedroom, searching beneath the couch, looking on the table, and finally at the door. So we might confidently assert that every object of experience is an object that *I* encounter. What comes to the fore is a relationship with being wherein the subject, the I and ego, plays a definitive role. The relation is likewise a product of the fact that within the experience of object, the ego subsists as an essential principle and condition so that we might say that *someone encounters something*. Inasmuch as that someone is in each case both you and I, to that extent every encounter is an encounter for some I.

We obtain then two distinct restrictions with respect to the encounter with being *qua* object of experience. First, I can only directly encounter some one object or collection of objects but never the whole, and so never the whole of being as such. In effect, the horizon of my encounter with being *qua* object is limited. For in any attempt to encounter the whole, e.g., extending the perceptual horizon of observation so as to include the complete domain of perceptual and indeed conceptual (as limited by time and the succession of thoughts) experience within a single comprehensive glance, I inevitably lose sight of both being and I. In further extending the horizon of observation, what remains is just an indefinite continuum from which all nature and

difference has been evacuated.

Second, the encounter with being is here further restricted to my ego, as an inherent condition for every encounter. This implies that every encounter with being is thereby rendered a being for me, and in general, a being for someone. For this reason, relational ontology speaks of the object of experience in each case according to various relational descriptors, viz., as a showing, an appearing, a phenomenon, presentation, representation—object. That which appears, appears for another. What shows and presents itself, shows and presents itself to someone. In effect, as the ego plays an integral role in every experiential encounter with object, to that extent the ontological status of the objects of my experience may be determined according to the mode of *being-given*.

We thereby first encounter being according to the transcendental determination that being is a *datum* in the sense of the object of experience. From the perspective of experience, being is given to me qua object. As noted, the whole of being can never be known as object. For as I expand the horizon of perception or conception, I encounter some one object or union of objects or succession of objects but never the whole. It in turn appears that an encounter with being apart from the subject is excluded from the realm of experience as such.

On the other hand, if we consider the subject not as an a priori transcendental condition governing experience but only as establishing specific restrictions with respect to experience qua consciousness of experience, then we obtain a distinct basis for understanding the precise nature of the being of this encounter. I know being according to the restriction that being is given to and for me. Being as such must in some sense be *contained* within the encounter according to this restriction. On the other hand, in dividing representation and thing itself as Kant has done, the immediate result is that being for me and being as such become entangled within phenomenal experience, according to the form of being-given. Things themselves inevitably become the realm of that of which there is no encounter, as it were, a world of objects without relation and so without reference (*noumena*).

On the other hand, every object, insofar as an object is given, includes within itself being according to the above restrictions. If the being of my experience were nothing but representation, then the relation of being-given would be unknown to me. I would know only object as a pure immediacy collapsible into and indistinguishable from my own subjectivity. But I can in fact recognize, identify and differentiate the relative parts within the relation that holds

between subject and object and such recognition must be due to the fact that being as such is in some sense given within being-given. Through reflection just such a relationship is revealed and in consequence we are able to distinguish what belongs to the subject from what belongs properly to object of my encounter and hence to being.

V

There is a second mode of encounter with being. For example, before walking downstairs, I am certain that the floor will be there and that my feet and my body are there. I have likewise a sense that the being of the living room, the couches, the windows, the doors and so on are all there. Of course, this recognition that being is *there* before I encounter being for the most part goes unheeded. In the main, I go about my daily activities in the assumption that there is something. I pour a cup of coffee or a glass of water or wine, turn on the television, read a book. I have no interest in the possibilities at ground to my every encounter with being or in the previous encounter that has just occurred. I talk and laugh and drive to work and am in general preoccupied, without being preoccupied with being, but nonetheless always immersed within the abiding recognition that being is there.

What is this recognition? It would be incorrect to suggest that when I do not experience an object that, as my missing keys, it simply ceases to be. To the contrary, whenever I experience an object there is implicit within this experience the fact that something else is there in the background to my encounter with being, so that I am confident that when I turn elsewhere, I will turn to and encounter some other thing.

But how do I know that being is there if I never have any direct encounter with the whole of being? There would appear to be a distinction between the kind of recognition that I have within the immediate here and now encounter with the givenness of being and the abiding recognition that being is there in the background to my every encounter. Evidence for this arises from the fact that at any moment I may consider some particular aspect of what it is that I am now doing and there arises from this a reflective recollection of that aspect of my body in its engagement as if from before. For instance, initially I do not notice the low hum of the air conditioner in the background until another points this out to me. Following this, I realize that although I was not explicitly aware of it at the time, I was somehow “aware” of the hum in another way. This

memorial understanding that reveals to me that being is there within the background to my every encounter I term “mindfulness”. We might say that whereas awareness applies to the explicit here and now encounter with object, mindfulness implies recognition that being is there prior to (in the order of experience) any such encounter. So even as I encounter a part of being from the perspective of being-given, I am nonetheless mindful of the whole of being in the background to that encounter. Still more, although I am the one who is in each case mindful, mindfulness extends beyond me insofar as it involves recognition of being prior to any encounter with an object where being and I necessarily stand within the restrictions of the relation of being-given.

But in what way do we here speak of an encounter with being through mindfulness? What serves as the basis of this encounter? Here the answer appears evident: mindfulness is related to embodiment and my being embedded in the body. For instance, I may be caught within the moment, swimming in the ocean, immersed within each stroke, the proper draw of each breath. Although I am not explicitly aware of it, I am yet mindful of the presence of the being of my whole body, of the body of water that surrounds me and of the ocean that surrounds this body of water, and so on. Immersed in the life of the body I am already in the world (*Inderweltsein*), as Heidegger early recognized.²² I am mindful that being is there because I am immersed in the body and through the body immersed within the world of embodied beings. Through my body, I further lay possessive claim to the being of my experience and call it “my own”. From this perspective, we encounter being according to the second mode of *being-mine*.

This second mode is readily seen in the example of poverty. The ancient Greeks were aware of the power of poverty understood according to a more universal sense. Within Plato’s *Symposium* and indeed the whole of Platonic thought we see a fundamental opposition between need and expediency where *eros* is brought forth from their admixture.²³ Likewise within Aristophanes’ *Plutus*, the god of wealth is there represented as blinded by Zeus so that he will abstain from awarding riches only to the just and those deserving but instead, indiscriminately, as fortune would have it. When Plutus is later given sight and the once impoverished but now rich Athenians rejoice in their wealth, Penia, the goddess of want and poverty, enters upon the scene to scold them and to re-mind them of their true place in existence. She censures them in attempting to drive her out and asserts that their well-being in fact depends upon her, further

²² See the first part of Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

²³ Plato, *Symposium*, 204d-209e.

asserting that she is the sole cause of all their blessings and that their safety depends on her alone.²⁴ In turn, through wealth we become forgetful of being, but through want we remain mindful that being is there.

Poverty involves an encounter with being as a whole. Through poverty being is brought forth from the perspective of lack. This instills value in being, which serves to reveal the more concrete dimensions inherent in transcendence. In a state of poverty, I recognize that being is there through the possessive relations that hold between myself, my body and other things. I am mindful that I abide in a place of lack with respect to the being that is there, which I am in need of and yet do not possess. Within this state of lack, I further come to know of the meaning of want. Poverty inflicts suffering upon the individual and the need for that which is, exerted through poverty, in turn determines that the being of my encounter is a fundamental reality. There is an encounter with hunger, exposure to the cold of winter, famine, the demolition of hopes, the injustice of an early death. In poverty, I encounter being as a whole through the privation and the need to possess being. Being in turn stands forth as that which is, in relation to me, according to the perspective of being-mine, which is to say, in the potency for appropriation and possession.

Two further points follow from this. In the first place, the mode of being-mine is expressed through the mode of being-given even as the former involves a more primordial mode of being in relation to things. This is evident from the fact that immersion within the body implies that at every moment I am never just somewhere but always here now. This is the constitutive condition of the relation that holds between being and I through the body. Through the body, being is likewise and during each waking moment given to me. So whether or not I explicitly pay attention to this givenness, I am nonetheless bound to the here and now being of my body so that I am always caught within the temporal passage of sensing, feeling, perceiving and so on. Mindfulness in turn subsists and indeed persists throughout, as a principle at bottom to this givenness. In effect, as being-given serves as an explicit and we might say, *actual* encounter with being, mindfulness and being-mine expresses always the *potency* for an encounter. The two are likewise interwoven into my every experiential encounter, so that at each moment, as being is given to and for me there is also mindful appropriation of being there in the background.

In the second place, the science of being demands objectivity with respect to the study of

²⁴ Aristophanes, *Plutus*, 467.

that which is. By objectivity is meant a subject-less account of being, as it were, being apart from any relation to a subject. On the other hand, the modes of encounter thus far examined, viz., being-given and being-mine, each involve definite restrictions with respect to the encounter with being. For being-given, the two restrictions are that being is always encountered in part and for me. For being-mine, the restrictions are that being is encountered as mine and according to the potency of being for me. As relational, however, the analysis of being according to the above modes and restrictions cannot serve as the basis for the science of being, which requires objectivity, and so belong instead, in the main, to relational ontology. As will be seen, however, a third mode of access to being does indeed present itself.

VI

Although ownership is expressed through mindfulness and being in the body, it is important to note that the body is not and cannot be the principle of ownership itself. This is evident from the following argument: Every relationship involves at least two terms where the terms themselves must be differentiable, dependent and non-reducible. So in the relation of Motherhood, the term “mother” is clearly differentiable from “daughter” (or “son”) and the two terms are likewise dependent in the sense that neither has independent meaning or sense apart from the other. So too, neither term is reducible to the other, i.e., being a mother cannot be reduced to being a daughter and vice-versa. On the other hand, if the body is the principle of ownership, then such relational structures inevitably fall apart. So ownership is itself a relation between an “owner” and the “owned”. As the principle of ownership, the body becomes the owner. But the body is likewise an object owned, viz., “My body is my own”. So then the body becomes both owner and owned and the two terms are each reducible into one another such that both become undifferentiated. In effect, for the relationship of ownership there must be some other basis and principle of ownership itself. That principle we here identify with the ego. Indeed, the ego is never owned by another but is always that which claims ownership over all other things to which it stands within such a relation.

For this reason, we call the ego the focal point of experience and have furthermore distinguished the embodied from the disembodied state of consciousness. Within the embodied state, as above noted, the ego is immersed within the life of the body. The ego experiences the

world as a body in relation to other bodies. This follows from the fact that within the embodied state, although we may speak of awareness, we cannot speak of any clear separation and isolation of self and other, I and world and in general, what belongs properly to me and to being apart from me. Instead, the ego experiences from the perspective of the body, wherein self and other merge into one. Although there is a sense of property and ownership, the reference to the ego is thereby muted, and appropriation passes from one body to another within the intersubjective domain of shared (embodied) experience.

We likewise think and feel within the embodied state. We want, hope for and form judgments and in each case these acts are embodied in the sense that they relate to the life of the ego immersed within the body. Within the embodied state, we speak of being in the world, of being in relation to other bodies, and so on, but we do not yet interpret experience as a specific encounter for I. Recognition of being as an *encounter* instead demands explicit reflective recognition of the relation that holds between being and I, which is never understood from the perspective of my being embodied.

From the embodied state, we must therefore depart, through reflection, into the disembodied state of consciousness. As disembodied, we immediately take up our position as if one step removed from the body and perceive, to use Locke's description, "the operations of our own mind".²⁵ In other words, we now view our own conscious acts as objects as well as the relation that holds between these acts and the associated objects toward which these acts are directed. Within the disembodied state, self and other, I and world, emerge in dialectical opposition. Subjectivity and objectivity are torn asunder so that the ego now views the world from the perspective of an opening formed between the two. Still more, as disembodied, the subject views even itself as object insofar as its own acts, originally embodied, emerge from and as an integral part of this relation, according to the modes of being-given and being-mine.

Through reflection, the embodied relations that hold between being and I rise to the surface and are made known to me.²⁶ For this reason and from this perspective, we might initially conclude with Descartes that the ego is nothing but these acts, as it were, a *res cogitans*. But such a conclusion is at best premature. Within the embodied state the ego is dispersed into the

²⁵ John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* II.1.4.

²⁶ It is a mistake to see reflection as a purely intellectual act. Reflection is an act of consciousness and so may likewise have more emotive sources at bottom to it, for instance, in the despair of depression, the loss of a loved one,

intersubjective relations that hold between itself, the body, and being in the world of other bodies. On the other hand, within the disembodied state, the reflecting ego now sees itself as an object, and by this is meant that the ego views itself in and through its own embodied relations. In effect, the ego knows itself as a relational focal point only. Despite this, as reflecting, the ego no longer experiences through its body but now views itself and the body as an object that is adjudicated to be “for me” and “my own”. A chasm is thereby created between subject and object, but the chasm is likewise mediated by the ego inasmuch as the ego is at bottom the focal point of the encounter.

Just as the embodied state has its own acts of thinking—wanting, feeling, judging, etc., so too the disembodied state has analogous species of acts as the result of reflection. The primary difference is that within the disembodied state, the ego is no longer immersed within these acts so that subject and object are merged together, but instead the ego now views every object objectively. By way of analogy, no longer immersed within the stream of experience, the ego views its experience at a distance, as though from a small vessel gliding along the surface. The ego furthermore views the objectivity of every object along with the relations that hold between itself and each object and so views its own subjectivity within that relation. As reflecting, I am no longer caught within the immediacy of pain or pleasure. Instead, I view myself as feeling and I view my own pain as a felt object. The same may be said for perception, thinking, wanting, and so on. Of course, each act is still undergone and indeed experienced, so that the ego can never truly separate itself from the body and embodied relations, for which reason we call the disembodied ego a relational focal point. Despite this, through reflection we obtain a new vantage point for the consideration of experience, viz., experience itself becomes for the ego an object that stands over my ego, and in such a way that the totality of experience is brought to the fore.

As reflecting, the ego now considers being as an encounter according to various standpoints. So the ego may observe this encounter in either the objectivity of its being-given or in the subjective appropriation of being-mine. In doing so, the ego may further *suspend judgment* regarding this undergoing and simply observe the play of this encounter as it unfolds.²⁷ But the ego may also take a different direction and standpoint with respect to the encounter with being.

fear of death, the will to nothing (in suicide), or in moments of guilt and sorrow where the ego reflectively looks upon itself in horror.

Rather than observing and suspending judgment, the ego may instead *assent* to that encounter through an act of judgment. It is from this latter perspective, from an assent and subsequent reflective judgment (reflex judgment) that a unique encounter with being comes to the fore so that the ego may now assert not only that *I encounter x*, but still more that *x is*. We note the radical distinction between these two assertions. In the first place, whereas the subject is necessarily included within the former encounter, within the latter reflex judgment, there is no such inclusion of the subject. In effect, the assertion becomes subject-less, as it were, devoid of any relation to a subject, and yet it is truly an encounter with being from the perspective of the subject's knowledge of that which is.²⁸

An illustration will help to further reveal this distinction. Yellow light extends, as a halo round the small office within which I now sit. I do not yet regard the source of this light. I am nonetheless mindful of the presence of something within the background. When I thereafter turn to this source, I see a lamp, and may further consider the lamp according to any number of its categorical features and properties. So I might consider its color, size, figure or even its parts, as the conical lampshade that tapers off into a metallic finial top. I might further consider where the lamp is and the distance that separates it from my own body. In each case, I consider something about my encounter with the lamp and indeed the relational structures that hold between being and I. So too, from the perspective of these relational structures, I recognize that the lamp is for me and is an encounter that is in some sense my own.

But in reflection, I might also pass into consideration of the fact that the lamp is not-mine according to another sense, viz., that as I look away, the lamp passes off into the background and I lose sight of it. Despite this, the memory of the lamp is still retained and as I view the halo of light emitted within the room, I now consider the lamp as a being that *can be* encountered and in general from the perspective of the potency for an encounter. In once again returning to the lamp I now regard the lamp, not just from the perspective of a being that can be possessed but instead as now a being that is given in an explicit encounter. In other words, the potency for an encounter has been actualized in an encounter with the givenness of the being of the lamp as

²⁷ Here of course we have in mind the phenomenological epoché.

²⁸ Regarding this reflex judgment, otherwise known as the judgment of existence, Gilson writes, "In order to go further, another class of judgments is required, namely, those by which we state that what the thing is, actually is, or exists. Such is the composite operation which we call the judgment of existence. By saying that *x is*, we mean to say that *x* is a certain *esse* (to be), and our judgment must needs be a composite operation precisely because, in such

object. In further considering the being that was only potentially mine with the being that is now given in an actual encounter, I dialectically separate and differentiate, judging that something about the lamp is not-mine, viz., the being of the lamp. From this, the reflex judgment follows that as not-mine but as now for me the lamp must stand in some sense on its own—*the lamp is*.

Initially, the reflex judgment might appear to follow from the *factum* of the lamp—so that the existence of the lamp is known only as a propositional encounter. But it is important to note this difference: the reflex judgment does not follow from the lamp as a factum that I encounter, but the factum of the lamp follows from an encounter with the existence of the lamp. Through reflection, the dialectic that emerges involves analysis of identity and difference. In particular, in the first dialectical movement, the lamp is not immediately given, but remains in potency through mindfulness as a being that I might appropriate within an explicit encounter. In the second movement, turning to the lamp, that potency is now actualized and the being of the lamp is encountered in act. In the third movement, these two prior movements are compared and from this the reflex judgment is formed, *x is*. It is only after this that the judgment may be further qualified, viz., *x is in fact there*.²⁹ We accordingly conclude that it is not from the factum of the lamp that the recognition of existence arises, but instead being is that which *can be* encountered and so recognition of existence arises from the capacity to be, coupled with the act of being, and hence from a comparison and judgment.

Of course, the reflex judgment here does not penetrate into the very focal point of this encounter. For this, further metaphysical analyses—reason and inference—are required that extend beyond the scope of this present investigation. Nonetheless, what is here discovered is unqualified being as such. This follows from the fact that through reflection coupled with judgment there is an encounter with being in the sense of assertion of the existence (*esse*) of the object of my encounter. Still more, the knowledge of that which is here *transcends* the relational structures inherent in subjectivity and being in relation. We in turn discover that metaphysics is possible as a science, nor does subjectivity stand in the way as an obstacle hindering this science. To the contrary, subjectivity coupled with reflection and judgment serve as the door into being and it is through this door, coupled with the desire to know, that further metaphysical inquiry into the nature of being as being finds its point of departure.

cases, reality itself is composite.” Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto/Ontario: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952), 187-188.

²⁹ In other words, ontological truth trumps propositional truth.