Heidegger’s History of Metaphysics, Part Four The Cartesian Destruction of Being

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Frans Hals, Portrait of René Descartes, 1649-1700.

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1. To Be Is to Be “Set Before”

In the previous installment of this series, we saw Heidegger contrasting modernity to the Middle Ages in the following terms:

For the Middle Ages . . . the being is the ens creatum, that which is created by the personal creator-God, who is considered to be the highest cause. Here, to be a being means: to belong to a particular rank in the order of created things, and, as thus created, to correspond to the cause of creation (analogia entis) . . . But never does the being’s being consist in its being brought before man as the objective. [1]

But what does it mean to say that in the modern era Being becomes “the objective”? We will see that this idea is intimately tied to Heidegger’s understanding of “representation.” I have referred to this concept already, but we have not had a chance to thoroughly explore it. We will do so in the present essay.

Heidegger writes that “[The] objectification of beings is accomplished in a setting-before, a re-presenting [Vor-stellen], aimed at bringing each being before it in such a way that the man who calculates can be sure — and that means certain — of the being.” [2] The modern objectification of beings means that they come to be seen merely as that which is “set before” a subject. “Object,” from Latin obiectum literally means what is “thrown against,” and can have the sense of “accusation” (as in “objection”). Modernity conceives beings as something “outside” the subject and thrown against it: the “ob-ject” stands in opposition to the subject (where “op-pose, from Latin again, literally means “put against”). Something cannot be an object except in relation to a subject that “has” this object.

To say that in the modern period Being becomes “the objective” therefore means that “to be” has come to mean “to be available to (or presented to) a subject.” This is yet another manifestation of what we have called in previous essays “the metaphysics of presence”: the history of metaphysics, for Heidegger, is the history of how Being (or how we understand Being) has been accommodated to the human desire for knowledge and control by conceiving beings as the “constantly present” (or “constantly available”). (See especially my earlier essay on Platonism.)

Because early modernity (as represented by figures like Descartes and Locke) conceives beings as “objects” in relation to a subject, beings are always understood narrowly, within the confines of the subject’s presuppositions about “objects,” and within the horizon of the subject’s “values” and agenda (i.e., what it wants to do, or believes it can do, with objects). Beings are seen as “op-posing” the subject in more than one sense. It is not just that they op-pose in the sense of being “put before” us. Their opposition, their otherness comes to be seen as challenging the subject. The object, the being, challenges us to inspect, test, measure, and manipulate it. One of the enduring features of modernity, which we can trace from the age of Descartes to the present day, is the conviction (seldom explicitly articulated) that to be is just to be an object that may be inspected, tested, measured, and manipulated by human subjects.

But why does Heidegger describe this as “representation,” and why does he introduce a hyphen into “re-presenting” (Vor-stellen), as seen earlier? Let’s begin with the German, because Vorstellen cannot be literally translated as “representation.” Vorstellen is a nominalization of the verb vorstellen. Vor– means “before” and stellen means “to put, or place,” so that vorstellen literally means “to put before.” When Heidegger describes objectification as a “setting-before” he is therefore identifying objectification with “representation.” For beings to be objectified means for them to be reduced simply to that which has been “set before” us. Heidegger writes:

In distinction from the Greek apprehension, modern representing, whose signification is first expressed by the word repraesentatio, means something quite different. Representation [Vor-stellen] here means: to bring the present-at-hand before one as something standing over-and-against, to relate it to oneself, the representer, and, in this relation, to force it back to oneself as the norm-giving domain. [3]

Here we see clearly, once again, the highly “subjective” character of modern “objectivity.” To “represent” always means to relate the object to oneself. And note Heidegger’s unusually strong language: we “force” it back to ourselves “as the norm-giving domain.” In other words, for modernity, to be is to be a representable object for a subject that measures, categorizes, e-valuates (assesses according to “values”), and utilizes or transforms according to its agendas. The subject confers meaning and “value” upon the object, which waits upon us to do so: “[Man] sets himself forth as the scene in which, henceforth, beings must set-themselves-before, present themselves . . . . Man becomes the representative [Repräsentant] of beings in the sense of the objective.” [4]

However, I can imagine someone raising a very reasonable objection to what we have seen from Heidegger so far. “How could it be otherwise?” they might ask. “How can we not relate objects to ourselves? Isn’t all of cognition an act of relating objects (of various kinds) to oneself? And what is uniquely modern about the concepts of the ‘subject’ and the ‘object’? Aren’t these concepts timeless and universal? Were not the Greeks, in the time of Homer, ‘subjects’ aware of ‘objects,’ relating those objects to themselves?” As I have said, this is a reasonable objection — and to really appreciate the force of Heidegger’s critique of modernity, it must be answered.

On one level, it would be perfectly legitimate to say to the imaginary objector that his questions arise because he has been so imprinted with modern conceptions of “subjectivity”/“objectivity” and “representation” that he cannot imagine an alternative. This response would in fact be true — but as an answer to the objection, it begs the question. In order to give a more substantive answer, we have to explore this idea of “representation” in much more detail. Heidegger presupposes that his audience is familiar with the history of modern “epistemology” (i.e., “theory of knowledge”), and with the concept of “representationalism.” However, not all of my readers may understand exactly what this refers to.

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2. The Fallacy of Representationalism

“Representationalism” is a term used by today’s historians of philosophy to designate a theory of cognition that was widely accepted in the early modern period, and still survives to this day in certain quarters. In the early modern period, it was articulated by a wide range of thinkers, and is most famously associated with Descartes and Locke (who arrive at the theory from quite different philosophical “methodologies”). Representationalism was a philosophical theory, but was also taken to be an established, scientific fact. To this day, it is often still taken as scientific fact, and functions as an interpretive framework for researchers working in cognitive science, as well as those who popularize their findings for the general public.

Representationalism holds that human beings do not perceive objects in the world, at least not directly. Objects in the “external world” present themselves to subjects, acting upon their sense organs. This stimulation causes the production of “images,” “ideas,” or “impressions” inside the mind. These “images,” or what have you, are held to re-present objects in the external world, and it is these re-presentations that I know directly. As Locke put the matter, “It is evident that the mind knows not things immediately, but only by the intervention of the ideas it has of them.” [5]

Representationalism presented itself as a plausible theory as a result of reflection on such phenomena as perceptual illusions and hallucinations (which do not seem to have been regarded as worthy of discussion by ancient and medieval philosophers, who barely mention these phenomena). For example, my mind can trick me into thinking I see pink monkeys. Since there aren’t actually any pink monkeys “out there,” what I must have seen is an image inside my mind. But perhaps all experience is of such images, with only some of those images “corresponding” to real objects in the world. When I see actual monkeys, at the zoo, I am also directly aware only of images. In this case, however, the images correspond to something “out there.” Locke writes that “Our knowledge . . . is real only so far as there is a conformity between our ideas and the reality of things.” [6]

We can also make representationalism plausible by reflecting on what we know about the sense organs and the brain — even if we are only in possession of very basic facts about anatomy. Such reflection began early on in the modern period, despite the influence of Cartesian mind-brain dualism. Very simply, we know that perception is a process involving a sense organ that “transmits” a stimulus to the brain, where it must be interpreted. The result is what I call my “perception” of the coffee cup next to me: my seeing (or feeling) the cup. Given that this experience is the result of a multi-stage process, it seems that perception could never, under any circumstances, be described as “direct.” We cannot, in other words, be perceiving the coffee cup itself. The direct object of our perception must instead be the result of the internal process that, in a sense, “copies” the coffee cup. It is this “copy,” or image, that we know directly, and by means of it we are indirectly aware of the cup. This inference is the basic reason why contemporary cognitive scientists (and many philosophers) are still wedded to the representationalist model.

The theory has a coda, however, which we cannot omit. We might scratch our heads upon hearing representationalism articulated and respond, “Well, it certainly doesn’t seem to me as if I am seeing an internal image. It seems like I am seeing the cup.” The representationalist answer is to say that the mind infers that its internal images must correspond to something “out there,” as a kind of “inference to the best explanation.” (“Why do I have this image in here? It must have been caused by something out there.”) We are so used to making this inference, so representationalism claims, that we do not notice it anymore, and thus fool ourselves into thinking that we are directly aware of the world. In fact, this experience of direct awareness is an illusion.

Representationalism is open to a classic objection, familiar to all undergraduate philosophy majors. We can call it the “homunculus objection.” Representationalism argues, as we have seen, that the idea of “direct perception” of the world is problematic, and postulates instead that the only thing we are directly aware of is internal images. But what is directly aware of those images? The theory seems to presuppose the existence of an “internal perceiver,” a homunculus (a tiny humanoid creature) which sits inside the mind and gazes upon the images, like a patron in a movie house. But if the direct perception of external objects is problematic, why isn’t direct perception of internal objects (images) equally problematic? Wouldn’t there have to be a process taking place in the homunculus by means of which it is able to cognize those internal images? If so, wouldn’t that mean that its perception of internal images is also indirect? This, in turn, would seem to entail that there is a homunculus in the homunculus, gazing at its own internal images of the internal images the first homunculus imagines it sees directly. From this, an infinite regress of homunculi can be generated.

So long as we insist on understanding awareness as “indirect,” in the manner of representationalism, something like the homunculus regress will present itself. Suppose we thought, naively, that we could stop the regress by simply insisting that the internal perceiver perceives images directly, in an unmediated fashion. Needless to say, this would be a completely arbitrary assertion. We would respond, correctly, “If you are willing to accept, as unproblematic, the direct perception of internal objects, why not bite the bullet and take our awareness of external objects as direct?”

In fact, we can make precisely this move. Representationalism is wrong: we can indeed say that our awareness of the world is direct. To understand how this is possible, we must turn to phenomenology. This will help us go much deeper in our critique of representationalism, and allow us to perceive the quintessentially modern assumptions on which it is based. It is one of the great contributions of Husserlian phenomenology to have demonstrated the fundamental wrongheadedness of the representationalist theory. Heidegger’s critique of representationalism in general, and of Cartesianism in particular, builds upon Husserl’s discoveries.

From the standpoint of phenomenology, representationalism could not get off the ground at all without first artificially dividing off the mind from the world; without first creating the “in here”/“out there” dichotomy I discussed at length in the previous essay. As I noted there, this dichotomy is fundamentally unique to the modern period. In order to erect the representationalist framework — and to generate the problems that arise from it, such as the “problem of the external world” — we have to begin with the assumption that we are “subjects” dwelling in an interior (an “in here”) that is cut off from “the world.” Only then can we conceive of such things as “internal images” — special sorts of beings separable from the world, contained in our boxlike interior. And only then do we arrive at the “problem” of linking these images up to something “out there.”

But why begin with this assumption that we are inside a boxlike interior, cut off from the world? This question is especially pertinent, given that the assumption runs completely counter to our actual experience. If we are true to the phenomena (i.e., if we are good phenomenologists) we will realize that we are always in the world, never cut off or removed from it. [7] I do not experience myself as “in here,” but always “out there.” Now, I am well aware that representationalism challenges this as naïve and “illusory.” But let us leave theories about awareness aside for the moment and focus solely on our experience of it. If I do, then I will have to admit that I experience “my self” as within what I call “the world,” interacting with things and existing alongside them. I am always out here, with the things that I am experiencing, acting upon them and being acted upon by them.

Further, what I call my awareness is nothing but a directedness towards the world. Awareness, Husserl taught us, is always intentional, meaning that no matter what sort of conscious act we are talking about (perceiving, emoting, abstracting, counting, etc.) it is always of or about something other than itself. [8] When I perceive, for example, I perceive things like this cup. As to the (correct) assertion that perception involves a “process,” no matter how many “stages” or how much “wetware” is involved in this process it is simply the means by which I am aware of this here cup.

There is no detached “mental image” of the cup at which I gaze directly. What I call an “image” is simply a perspective on the cup — a perspective affected by such things as my location relative to the cup, the angle at which I view it, the lighting under which it is seen, etc. Nor is there any “inference” I must perform to connect an image of the cup to the cup itself. No, what I am aware of is just the cup itself, perceived under a set of conditions. The representationalist claim that we “infer” that images correspond to “external objects” is simply an ad hoc invention, necessitated by the predicament into which the representationalist puts himself. I have no experience of making such an inference, therefore there is no phenomenological basis for claiming that I do make it.

Awareness is in fact a whole that consists of two moments or aspects: the mind, or the being that is aware, and the world that it is aware of. There is no consciousness without, in some fashion or other, a directedness towards that world. The fundamental error of representationalism consists in detaching a part from the whole and imagining that it can be something independent of the whole: detaching “the mind” from the world and treating it (as Descartes does) as a “substance” (a being) that exists independently of its world. Once these are artificially detached or abstracted from each other, getting them together again presents itself as one of the “problems of philosophy.” Phenomenology does not solve this problem, it dissolves it.

Robert Sokolowski (a Husserlian phenomeologist) puts the matter eloquently, as follows:

[People] will often take the mind to be a self-enclosed sphere, that is, a piece that can be separated from the worldly context to which it naturally and essentially belongs. Then they will ask how the mind can ever get outside itself and find out what is going on in the world. But the mind cannot be separated out in this way; the mind is a moment [an aspect; an inseparable part] to the world and the things in it; the mind is essentially correlated with its objects. The mind is essentially intentional. There is no “problem of knowledge” or “problem of the external world,” there is no problem about how we get to “extramental” reality, because the mind should never be separated from reality from the beginning. Mind and being are moments to each other; they are not pieces that can be segmented out of the whole to which they belong. Likewise, the human mind is often separated from the brain and the body as though it were a piece and not a moment founded upon them; the “mind-brain” problem can also be treated as an instance of confusion regarding parts and wholes. [9]

3. Representationalism and Modern Problems

We are now in a position to answer our imaginary objector who asks, “Isn’t all of cognition an act of relating objects to oneself? What is ‘modern’ about that?” And: “What is uniquely modern about the concepts of the ‘subject’ and the ‘object’? Aren’t these concepts timeless and universal?” To take the second issue first, the answer should now be obvious. The modern subject-object distinction we have discussed is highly specific: it construes the subject as contained within a “self-enclosed sphere” (to borrow Sokolowski’s words), experiencing objects internal to it, and only indirectly aware of what is “out there.” This understanding of the relation of what we might simply call “the knower” to the world is decidedly not timeless and universal. Ancient and medieval philosophers never describe our relation to the world in this way, which is why the “problem of the external world” simply does not arise in ancient and medieval philosophy. The self-enclosed, monadic subject is a modern construction.

On the other hand, the first issue — “Isn’t all of cognition an act of relating objects to oneself? What is ‘modern’ about that?” — is somewhat more complicated. The answer to the first question is yes: in every act of knowing, we are, in one way or another, relating beings to ourselves. When I measure a bookcase, I am relating the bookcase to a standard I have adopted, one that (in the US, at least) literally relates the object to myself: I measure in terms of feet. When a biologist studies an animal, he implicitly relates it to the human species: this creature is coldblooded, unlike mammals, unlike me. When an astronomer calculates the distance of a star, it is always the distance from us. Such has been true for human beings in all times and in all places.

Modernity’s way of relating beings to ourselves is unique, however. Let us recall Heidegger’s words: “Representation here means: to bring the present-at-hand before one as something standing over-and-against, to relate it to oneself, the representer, and, in this relation, to force it back to oneself as the norm-giving domain.” [10] The modern subject does not merely relate beings back to itself, it comes to conceive of the Being of those beings as exhausted by that relation. In other words, to be becomes “to be related to the subject.” This is something fundamentally new, and not to be found in pre-modern thinking. Heidegger contrasts the modern perspective to the ancient Greek as follows:

[For the Greeks, the] being does not acquire being in that man first looks upon it in the sense of representation that has the character of subjective perception. Rather, man is the one who is looked upon by beings, the one who is gathered by self-opening beings into presencing with them. To be looked at by beings, to be included and maintained and so supported by their openness, to be driven about by their conflict and marked by their dividedness, that is the essence of humanity in the great age of Greece. [11]

For the moderns, by contrast, to be is to be looked at by human subjects. This metaphysics is operative in all modern thinking and acting. It is present from the beginning, in early modern representationalism and Cartesianism, and it is with us today. Sometimes it works behind the scenes and is tacitly assumed, without being articulated, and sometimes, chiefly in modern philosophy, it is explicitly put forward as theory. The most explicit, and extreme formulations of this metaphysics are to be found in the “idealist” tradition that includes Leibniz (1646-1716) and the later German idealists — especially J. G. Fichte (1762-1814), a thinker we will discuss in a later installment, about whom (curiously) Heidegger has little to say. The classic formulation of this modern “subjectivist” metaphysics is to be found in the empiricist George Berkeley, a thinker about whom Heidegger has nothing to say (so far as I know): esse est percipi, “To be is to be perceived.”

As I have noted in previous installments, for Heidegger the “history of metaphysics” is not the same thing as the history of a branch of philosophy. Heidegger holds that different ages exhibit different metaphysics, and that the philosophers merely articulate the metaphysical Zeitgeist. Can we discern how this “subjectivist” metaphysics, which holds that the Being of beings is exhausted by their relation to us, is operative in our own time, in our own way of living and relating to the world? If we can do this, then we can truly appreciate the power of Heidegger’s critique of modernity, and how he traces the origins of modern thought to the “metaphysics of presence.”

Heidegger claims that the present modern, technological age is dominated by a metaphysics that sees all that exists as having the status of raw material or “standing reserve” (Bestand) to be exploited for human use. The following passage, from Heidegger’s “Bremen Lectures,” has become quite famous, and is worth quoting at length:

A tract of land is imposed upon, namely for the coal and ore that subsists in it. The subsisting stone . . . is challenged forth and subsequently expedited along. The earth’s soil is drawn into such a placing and is attacked by it. It is ordered, forced into conscription. . . . Through such requisitioning [Bestellen] the land becomes a coal reserve, the soil an ore depository. This requisitioning is already of a different sort from that whereby the peasant had previously tended his field. Peasant activity does not challenge the farmland; rather it leaves the crops to the discretion of the growing forces; it protects them in their thriving. In the meantime, however, even the tending of the fields [die Feldbestellung] has gone over to the same requisitioning [Be-Stellen] that imposes upon the air for nitrogen, the soil for coal and ore, the ore for uranium, the uranium for atomic energy, and the latter for orderable destruction. Agriculture is now a mechanized food industry, in essence the same as the production of corpses in the gas chambers and extermination camps, the same as the blockading and starving of countries, the same as the production of hydrogen bombs. But now what is it positioned toward, the coal that is positioned in the coal reserve, for example? It is not poised upon the table like the jug. The coal, for its part, is imposed upon, i.e., challenged forth, for heat, just as the ground was for coal; this heat is already imposed upon to set in place steam, the pressure of which drives the turbines, which keep a factory industrious, which is itself imposed upon to set in place machines that produce tools through which once again machines are set to work and maintained. [12]

Whence comes this metaphysics of “all is raw material for human use,” which has given us the ugliness of the modern industrial and commercial landscape, environmental depredations of all kinds, and the carnage of “social planning” (for man, too, is a raw material)? It began precisely when we came to see beings as what is “set before” or “thrown against” us — when we began to believe that to be is just to be an ob-ject that op-poses the subject. This object puts a challenge to us in that it is taken as an other that stands opposed, that resists. So we challenge it. To use Heidegger’s language above, beings are “challenged forth” and “requisitioned.” Beings are “plundered” (gerafft, as Heidegger says elsewhere in the “Bremen Lectures”). We “force [them] back” to ourselves “as the norm-giving domain” — meaning, it is we who decide what this being, this raw material, shall be.

If this Heideggerean account of the present age seems rather chillingly on target, it is sobering to reflect that virtually all of our modern ills flow from the decision to conceive ourselves as “subjects” removed from the world. Representationalism thus emerges as a good deal more significant than how it is presented to us in school — as an abstract “epistemological theory” about which we have gentlemanly debates, and on which nothing important is riding.

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4. Subject Becomes Substance

In discussing the emergence of modernity from the Middle Ages, Heidegger writes that,

What is decisive is not that humanity frees itself from previous bonds but, rather, that the essence of humanity altogether transforms itself in that man becomes the subject. To be sure, this word “subject” must be understood as the translation of the Greek ὑποκείμενον. The word names that-which-lies-before, that which, as ground, gathers everything onto itself. [13]

What does Heidegger mean when he says that in modernity humanity becomes “subject” in the sense of ὑποκείμενον (hupokeimenon)? This Greek philosophical term is often translated “substance” or “substratum” and literally means “what lies under.” The early Greek thinkers were searching for a hypokeimenon in the sense of an ultimate “stuff” out of which all things were made, or from which they emerged (thus, Thales said it was water; Anaximenes, air; Anaximander, an “indefinite” stuff, etc.). Such a hupokeimenon would “lie under” all things, in the sense of being their foundation; that upon which everything depends.

Heidegger is telling us that in the modern period, the subject (the self, the mind, the ego) becomes, in effect, the “foundation” for all things. He continues, “When . . . man becomes the primary and genuine subiectum, this means that he becomes that being upon which every being, in its way of being and its truth, is founded. Man becomes the referential center of beings as such. But this is only possible when there is a transformation in the understanding of beings as a whole.” Man becomes “the referential center of beings as such” because, as we have seen, modernity understands to be as “to be an object,” i.e., to be related to a subject. If this is how Being is construed, then man becomes the “foundation” for Being itself. Modern metaphysics thus becomes literally ego-centric.

This is quite an extraordinary claim, and may at first be met with skepticism. But Heidegger’s point is not only true, it is obviously true. In order to see this, we have to look a bit more closely at Descartes, a thinker I have so far only mentioned from time to time, but who has loomed large at the margins of my entire discussion. Without question, we can identify Descartes as the quintessential modern thinker. His influence has been enormous, though we would do well to bear in mind Heidegger’s claim, already referenced above, that thinkers like Descartes did not invent modernity, but instead gave voice to the “spirit of the times.” This spirit was already in the air when they first set pen to paper.

Descartes very clearly expresses modernity’s artificial separation of knower from world, of which I earlier gave a phenomenological critique. For Descartes, the subject or mind becomes a “substance,” a being ontologically distinct from the material world. [14] Mind is defined as “unextended substance,” meaning that it does not occupy space, while body (any and all body, not just my body) is “extended substance.” Further, mind is, predictably, locked in an interiority from which it confronts objects “outside” it. Heidegger writes that “It is in the metaphysics of Descartes that, for the first time, the being is defined as the objectness of representation, and truth as the certainty of representation.” [15]

What does Heidegger mean by “truth as the certainty of representation”? Descartes’s Meditations on First Philosophy (1641) begins with the philosopher looking for certainty, because he observes that human knowledge is in disarray and the sciences are in need of a firm foundation. Such a foundation, Descartes believes, would have to be knowledge that is absolutely certain, and he stipulates that knowledge is certain when absolutely no doubt, no matter how slight or implausible, can be raised about it. This preoccupation with certainty is unique to modern philosophy, and in the last installment I discussed Heidegger’s account of how it arises from the Christian preoccupation with certainty of salvation (certainty concerning the ultimate fate of the immortal soul).

In any case, since what is certain cannot doubted, Descartes uses doubt as a method for finding the certain. He thus proceeds to doubt all that he knows, in hopes of finding some item of knowledge that cannot be doubted. He writes in his first meditation:

Several years have now passed since I first realized how numerous were the false opinions that in my youth I had taken to be true, and thus how doubtful were all those that I had subsequently built upon them. And thus I realized that once in my life I had to raze everything to the ground and begin again from the original foundations, if I wanted to establish anything firm and lasting in the sciences. [16]

Descartes does indeed then proceed to “raze everything to the ground.” He divides all knowledge into that which is derived from the senses and that which is derived purely from the intellect (e.g., mathematics). He then subjects both types of knowledge to the most thoroughgoing skepticism possible. (The sort of doubts raised about the senses, incidentally, are predicated on the representationalist claim that our immediate knowledge is of “images.”) The result is that all of knowledge emerges as doubtful, even mathematics. Descartes thus resolves to set aside this doubtful knowledge, “as if I had discovered it to be completely false.” [17]

Nonetheless, he persists in his quest for certainty, at one point comparing himself to Archimedes: “Archimedes sought but one firm and immovable point in order to move the entire earth from one place to another. Just so, great things are also to be hoped for if I succeed in finding just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshaken.” [18] This comparison is much more apt than Descartes himself realized, for he has not just moved the world, he has, in effect, destroyed it, via his radical skepticism. Descartes even conceptualizes the matter this way himself, saying at one point, “I have persuaded myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world: no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies.” [19] This “destruction” is accomplished from the “firm and immovable point” that is the modern, “detached” subject we have discussed at length; the “I” that artificially abstracts itself from its world.

The “firm foundation” Descartes seeks turns out to be nothing less than the self-certainty of the subject. My own existence is indubitable: “‘I am, I exist’ is necessarily true every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind” (“I exist” cannot be doubted, since the attempt to doubt proves the existence of the doubter). [20] This is why we should take Heidegger quite seriously when he says that in modernity, man becomes the “foundation” (the hupokeimenon) of Being itself.

However, if Descartes could read the above account he would surely dispute it. He would point out that in the Meditations he moves from the self-certainty of the ego cogito to proving the existence of God. It is God, Descartes would aver, who is the “foundation” of existence, since God is creator. God’s existence then serves, Descartes proceeds to argue, as foundation for our knowledge, since if God exists and God is good, he would not allow us to be systematically deceived in our pursuit of the truth.

However, Descartes’s self-understanding, like that of so many philosophers, is inadequate. The truth is that God’s existence is also “suspended” in Descartes’s process of philosophical discovery, and the divine existence must be demonstrated and secured by the human intellect, through “proof.” The subject thus becomes final authority for all truth and all Being, even that of God. This is why Heidegger can say (as quoted earlier) that modern man “becomes that being upon which every being, in its way of being and its truth, is founded.” For Descartes, real truth, ultimate truth, is certainty — and this means that ultimate truth is defined in reference to a subjective state: it is that which I cannot doubt.

Descartes’s quest for “objective” truth as certainty plants the seeds of a thoroughgoing “subjectivism,” though he did not realize it. In fact, it is precisely the manner in which modernity conceptualizes truth as “objective” (i.e., removed from us, detached, “outside” us) that makes this subjectivism possible. Heidegger writes that “The whole of modern metaphysics, Nietzsche included, maintains itself within the interpretation of Being and of truth opened up by Descartes.” [21] But how can this be? Isn’t Nietzsche the very antithesis of Cartesian rationalism? I will devote a good deal of attention to Nietzsche in a later installment of this series, but something brief can be said here, just to indicate where we are headed in this “history of metaphysics.”

In The Gay Science, in the famous “Parable of the Madman,” Nietzsche refers to the “death of God” and lays the blame squarely at our feet: “We have killed him — you and I! We are all his murderers.” But he asks, “Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon?” [22] The answer to this question is actually quite clear: Descartes did. Descartes gave us that sponge. Modernity wipes away earth, sky, minds, bodies — and gods. When Being is defined in reference to the subject, when man “becomes the referential center of beings as such,” then we lose any sense of dealing with real “beings” at all. Years ago, in my essay “Knowing the Gods,” I wrote the following, drawing upon Heidegger:

In regarding nature only as raw material to be made over according to his designs, for all intents and purposes modern man takes the position that nature has no being. Instead, it waits for us to confer being (or form, or meaning) upon it. We recognize no limits on our power to manipulate and to control. (When we do encounter what appear to be limits, we insist that eventually they will all be overcome, as Progress marches on.) It can easily be seen that this desire to remake, reorder, and perfect everything — this desire to place our stamp upon all — amounts to a kind of nihilistic desire to negate all otherness and to make the self (or the human) absolute.

The result is not the deification we may have been expecting. The result, in fact, is a profound sense of loss: the experience of the “death of God.” Quoting Nietzsche further,

What were we doing when we unchained this earth from the sun? Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sidewards, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and a down? Aren’t we straying as though through an infinite nothing? Isn’t empty space breathing at us? Hasn’t it got colder? [23]

Nietzsche’s suggestion for dealing with this disorientation is that we must “become gods” merely “to appear worthy” of our murder of God. And this is exactly why Heidegger locates Nietzsche’s philosophy as “within the interpretation of Being and of truth opened up by Descartes.” The Overman who “transvalues” values, who writes “new values on new tablets” is the offspring of Descartes’s omnipotent ego cogito, sitting in judgment on all that exists.

In our next installment, we will finally turn to Heidegger’s remarkable understanding of early modernity as “age of the world picture.” We will turn also to the rise of philosophical “system building,” and to the rise of modern philosophical idealism in the person of Leibniz.

Appendix. Outline of the Series:

The plan for this series, which will consist of five essays total (some divided into several installments), follows below. Each essay builds on the last, but each is also relatively self-contained.

Part One: Why Heidegger and Traditionalism are not compatible; major errors in Traditionalism from a Heideggerian perspective.

Part Two (multiple installments): Heidegger’s history of metaphysics from Platonism to Nietzsche. This account will deepen our understanding of why Heidegger would regard Traditionalism as a fundamentally modern movement, as well as deepen our understanding of modernity. Among other things, I will discuss Evola’s problematic indebtedness to German Idealism, especially J.G. Fichte, whose philosophy (I argue) is like a vial of fast-acting, concentrated modern poison.

Part Three: From Nietzsche to the present age of post-War modernity, which Heidegger characterizes as das Gestell (“enframing”). Part Four will deal in detail with this fundamental Heideggerian concept, which is central to his critique of technology.

Part Four: How Heidegger proposes that we respond to technological modernity. His project of a “recovery” of a pre-metaphysical standpoint; his “preparation” for the next “dispensation of Beyng.” His phenomenology of authentic human “dwelling” (“the fourfold”), and Gelassenheit.

Part Five: A call for a new philosophical approach, building upon Heidegger and the Traditionalists, while moving beyond them. Three primary components: (1) The recovery of “poetic wisdom” (to borrow a term from G.B. Vico): Heidegger’s project of the recovery of the pre-metaphysical standpoint now applied to myth and folklore, and expanded to include non-Greek sources (e.g., the pre-Christian traditions of Northern Europe); (2) Expanding Heidegger’s project of the “destruction” of the Western tradition to include the Gnostic and Hermetic traditions, Western esotericism, and Western mysticism; (3) Finally, social and cultural criticism from a standpoint informed by the critique of metaphysics, critique of modernity, and recovery of “poetic wisdom.”