

A Case against the 'Warm Room' Philosophy: Heidegger vs. Descartes

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ABSTRACT

In *Being and Time* Heidegger charges the Cartesian legacy with two offenses: (1) largely neglecting the phenomenon of the world, and (2) ignoring the important mode of encountering entities *within* the world which Heidegger calls *ready-at-hand*. In this article I will attempt to clarify both charges and provide an analysis of Heidegger's phenomenological conception of the world as opposed to the Cartesian 'scientific outlook'. The attitude of detached beholding, assumed by Descartes as the starting point of his *Meditations*, limits the range of all philosophical issues to what can be thought and experienced in a care-free state of untroubled contemplation. Precisely this starting point of Descartes is unacceptable for Heidegger, for whom the very 'essence' or 'Being' of man (*Dasein*) is *care (Sorge)*. By excluding everyday attitudes and concerns from the realm of philosophy Descartes overlooks the biggest and indeed the most familiar part of the human life experience, and relies instead on a state of mind, which is, arguably, the least natural for us. In this lie the origins of the subject/object distinction and the traditional epistemological and ontological problems that arise with this split. Heidegger's pointing to this 'presupposition of attitude' common to much of the modern philosophy, and his phenomenological alternative to the Cartesian mode of thinking, are among the most important insights of *Being and Time*.

A Case against the ‘Warm Room’ Philosophy: Heidegger vs. Descartes

In *Being and Time* Heidegger immerses the attentive reader in a continuous dialogue with the traditional views, values, and foundations, where the established authorities are all “ontologically suspect” (289)¹, and are therefore thoroughly interrogated on the deepest and most subtle presuppositions of their stands. Descartes is one of those philosophers whose ontology is being questioned and found inadequate for the aims and purposes of Heidegger’s analytic. More specifically, Heidegger charges the Cartesian legacy with the following:

Descartes conception of the world is ontologically defective, [...] his interpretation and the foundations on which it is based have led him to *pass over* both the phenomenon of the world and the Being of those entities within-the-world which are proximally ready-to-hand (95).

Thus Descartes in his ontology is said to neglect, firstly, the phenomenon of the world as such, and, secondly, the important mode of encountering entities within the world that Heidegger calls ready-at-hand. In this paper I will attempt to clarify both of these charges and give an analysis of Heidegger’s conception of the world as opposed to the Cartesian ‘scientific outlook’.

It is true that a person wishing to observe the vicinity and climbing a hill to achieve a better view is already predetermined in what he will see and what he will necessarily overlook simply in virtue of the fact of his choosing this or that particular vantage point. Descartes begins his consideration of the most foundational matters of life and philosophy

¹ All quotations from Heidegger’s *Being and Time* refer to the pagination of German editions, which is also preserved on the margins of Macquarrie and Robinson’s translation.

from a position he judges to be the most privileged for such a challenging task. In his *Discourse on Method* he refers to his stay in Germany during one winter: “There was no conversation to occupy me, and being untroubled by any cares or passions, I remained all day alone in a warm room. There I had plenty of leisure to examine my ideas” (10)². Thus from the very outset, as Heidegger would argue, philosophy, and hence understanding of the world, is limited to what can be thought of and experienced in a carefree state of untroubled contemplation. Descartes’ remark here is more than a merely accidental biographical detail, but rather specific philosophical vantage point from which he proceeds in his investigation. To be sure, Descartes’ “warm room” description not only refers to that particular room in Germany, or, to what later served him as a convenient and safe “warm room”, namely, the country of Holland, but prescribes a certain methodology in doing philosophy. No cares, moods, anxieties or passions of everyday life are admitted into that room, since it is only through the dispassionate and strictly ‘objective’ meditations that the ultimate truth is said to be found.

Precisely this starting point of Descartes is unacceptable for Heidegger, for whom the very ‘essence’ or ‘Being’ of man is *care (Sorge)*. By excluding everyday attitudes and concerns from the realm of philosophy Descartes overlooks the biggest and indeed the most familiar part of any human life experience, and relies instead on a state of mind, which is, arguably, the least natural for human beings, namely the state of detached contemplation. In this, as Heidegger observes, Descartes faithfully follows the long-standing tradition:

² All quotations from Descartes are taken from *Discourse on Method and Meditations*, Prentice Hall, Inc., New Jersey, 1952. Notably, Descartes starts *Meditations* with a very similar disposition: “I have freed my mind from all kinds of cares; I feel myself, fortunately, disturbed by no passions; and I have found a serene retreat in peaceful solitude” (75).

The problem of how to get appropriate access to entities within-the-world is one which Descartes feels no need to raise. Under the unbroken ascendance of the traditional ontology, the way to get a genuine grasp of what really *is* has been decided in advance: it lies in ‘beholding’ in the widest sense or ‘thinking’ (Heidegger 96).

We may notice in passing that the thoroughgoing methodological skepticism of Descartes’ *First Meditation* considerably leaves this fundamental presupposition, which dates back to the Greek heritage, intact.

The major implication of accepting the pure thinking as the only suitable attitude towards the world is the immediate split of reality into a subject and an object. The epistemological and ontological problems that arise with this split are well known, and Descartes finds himself in a situation where he has to struggle with the inevitable isolation of a lonely thinking being – *res cogitans*. Man, conceived primarily as a contemplating subject radically opposed to the ‘outer’ world, has to secure the very existence of this world by some rational proof. In his *Sixth Meditation* (133-134) Descartes attempts to provide the required proof for the existence of the corporeal objects³, but its validity is questionable and the degree of certainty that it gives is no match for the proof of self-existence. In spite of all the efforts, Descartes’ world of physical external objects remains a somewhat shaky phenomenon with an ambiguous ontological status, whose existence, in the final analysis, we should accept on non-rational grounds.

Heidegger’s criticism of Descartes, however, does not deal with the logical weakness of the proof for the existence of the ‘external’ world, but questions the

³ Descartes does not seem to deal with an idea of the world directly, but it is clear that the world for him is equivalent either to pure extension or to the totality of all extended objects.

philosophical approach that has led to the very ‘problem’ of the objective world. Descartes’ method leads first to stripping man of all his cares and passions, values and interests, involvements and relationships, that is, his *world* as it is experienced in everyday life, reducing him to a bare thinking subject, and later seeks to ‘re-supply’ this lonely subject with the ‘world’ of its own. According to Heidegger, this ‘procedure’ is not only redundant but ontologically misleading.

For Heidegger, the phenomenal world is an *a priori* condition of Dasein’s being. The world is not something that is outside Dasein. Dasein is essentially Being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*), and the ‘world’ is an *existentiale*⁴ of Dasein. Not unlike pure intuitions of Kant, the ‘world’ is the prime condition of all experience with beings. Heidegger strongly denies any interpretation of the world as ‘objective’ reality opposed to ‘subjective’ understanding. ‘World’ is not something completely different from Dasein either, but it is the way of being of Dasein. Dasein does not happen to be coincidentally placed in the world that now surrounds it, as Descartes seems to imply, but Dasein *as* Dasein has its *worldhood*, it is essentially worldly: “Ontologically, ‘world’ is not a way of characterizing those entities which Dasein is *not*; it is rather a characteristic of Dasein itself” (Heidegger 64). The very reason why Descartes was able to reduce himself to a ‘worldless’ subject was his underlying ontological structure as Being-in-the-world. In other words, one needs to *have* the world in the first place to be able to abstract oneself from it.

It is not the case that man ‘is’ and then has, by way of an extra, a relationship-of-Being towards the ‘world’ – a world with which he provides himself occasionally. Dasein is never proximally an entity which is, so to speak, free

⁴ As opposed to the *category*, which modifies beings other than Dasein.

from Being-in, but which sometimes has the inclination to take up a 'relationship' towards the world. Taking up relationships towards the world is possible only *because* Dasein, as Being-in-the-world, is as it is (Heidegger 57).

Thus Descartes' attempt to add a meaningful world to a subject on a later stage of his meditations cannot remedy the problem either, because the 'world' he seeks to adjunct to a bare subject is very different from the world Heidegger presupposes as an a priori *existentiale* of Dasein. Descartes, and hence the traditional conception, explains the 'objective' world primarily in spatial terms (it is pure extension, it is 'outside' of a subject etc.). The Subjects' initial relationship to the world, on this picture, is that of a geographical location within the extended world. To be *in* the world for Descartes is closely analogous to water being in a glass, or a chair in a room. Traditional Being-*in*-the-world relates the idea of *in*-clusion. For Heidegger, however, Being-*in*-the-world reflects the idea of intimate *in*-volvement. Dasein's primordial relationships towards the world are those of willing, acting, caring or fearing, and only derivatively and somewhat artificially one may conceive the world in terms of pure extension as a separate external entity. Hence Heidegger's negative reaction to all the attempts to 'prove' the existence of the 'outer' world. But whereas Kant, for instance, charges the Cartesian tradition only with the inability to provide a sufficient and logically tenable refutation of idealism⁵, Heidegger emphatically denies the need for such refutation at all:

Kant calls it a 'scandal of philosophy and of human reason in general' that there is still no cogent proof for the 'existence of things outside of us' which will do away with any skepticism [...] The 'scandal of philosophy' is not that this proof

⁵Cf.: "It still remains a scandal to philosophy and to human reason in general that the existence of things outside us must be accepted merely on faith and that if anyone thinks good to doubt their existence, we are unable to counter his doubts by any satisfactory proof." Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*.

has yet to be given, but that *such proofs are expected and attempted again and again* (Heidegger 203; 205).

But it is important to note here that Heidegger's claim that no proof for the external world is needed does *not* yet mean that the truth of world's existence is just a self-evident, foundational belief that every Dasein primordially holds. On the contrary, Heidegger argues that no one ever held such a belief (except in a rather artificial and derivative mode of relating to beings), and this is precisely what makes all attempts to prove it utterly misguided: "The reality of the external world is exempt from any proof of it or *belief in it*"⁶ [my emphasis]. The world in a sense is 'a given', but not as a subject of theoretical knowledge. It is always present as the horizon of one's caring involvement with beings, without itself becoming conspicuous for Dasein as something present at hand or an object for scientific investigation. Indeed, one may argue that for Heidegger, at the very moment when Dasein discovers the world as the subject of theoretical concern laid bare in its 'objective' existence, it has *already* lost it in some important sense.

It may be helpful to contrast at this point Heidegger's treatment of the Cartesian standpoint with yet another line of the more traditional criticism of Descartes. I have just mentioned that Kant in his first *Critique* was not satisfied with the logical quality of the proof for the existence of the 'outer' world given in *Meditations*, and we have shown why Heidegger refused to follow Kant's way of thinking on this subject. Yet another long-standing critical tradition deals with the questionable Cartesian proof for the existence of the substantial *self*. David Hume was among those who had pointed out that from the empirical fact that there is a thought process or an attitude of doubt, the existence of the

⁶ Heidegger, Martin; "History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena", Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985; p. 295-95.

self, which thinks or doubts does not follow. It was argued that Descartes inferred *more* than he was logically entitled to when he accepted as given the existence of *res cogitans*.

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.⁷

Hume's famous response to this difficulty was to reduce the self or the soul to a "a bundle or collection of different perceptions which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity"⁸ and thus do away with that imperceptible and logically dubious substance called "thinking thing."

But once again, Heidegger strongly dissociates himself from Hume's line of criticism as well: "If, in the ontology of Dasein, we 'take our departure' from a worldless "I" in order to provide this "I" with an Object and an ontologically baseless relation to that Object, then we have 'presupposed' not too much, but *too little*" (Heidegger 316). Heidegger seems to say here that not only Dasein, but also the world should be given an *a priori* status. Therefore, to reveal a 'worldless' Dasein is not accepting "too much", as Hume would argue, but revealing rather *too little* about the essential makeup of man. The world of Dasein's cares and attitudes is some sense constitutive of Dasein's existence.

It should now become obvious that Heidegger stands out against most of the critics of Descartes on this point: whereas Kant, Hume and many of the modern philosophers, accepting the basic framework of Cartesian thinking, seek to amend the particulars, Heidegger sees the whole structure as inherently defective and beyond any repairs.

⁷ Hume, David. *A Treatise on Human Nature* (I, iv, 6).

⁸ *Ibid.*

At this point we may briefly summarize the conclusions reached thus far. We have seen that Descartes' original starting point, namely his deeply held belief in pure thinking as a privileged attitude (what I would call a "warm room" philosophy), forces him to overlook the richness of human experience and reduces the idea of the world (or reality) to an extended spatial continuum, a mere 'container' where objects of science are found for a speculating subject. Heidegger points out the derivative nature of the subject-object relationship towards the world, and reveals the inadequacy of this impoverished 'world' of Descartes to do full justice to Dasein's ontological structure. Thus he rightly accuses the Cartesian legacy with "passing over" the phenomenon of the world.

Heidegger's second charge, as it was mentioned earlier, deals with the intra-worldly experience: "[Descartes'] interpretation and the foundations on which it is based have led him to *pass over* [...] the Being of those entities within-the-world which are proximally ready-to-hand" (95). But before we can fully see the deficiency of the Cartesian approach to the entities within-the-world, we should first look closely at the two modes of Dasein's encounter with beings as presented by Heidegger in *Being and Time*.

In a process of knowing Dasein encounters things in two fundamental modes. An entity can manifest itself to Dasein in its practical usefulness or instrumentality as "ready-to-hand" (*Zuhanden*) (69); or an entity can be revealed as merely present there for one's 'theoretical' consideration, "present-at-hand" (*Vorhanden*) (72). Heidegger argues, and this is an important point, that Dasein, being characterized primarily as 'concern,' (or 'care') encounters things as useful disposables ("ready-to-hand") *prior* to its encountering them as objects of 'theoretical' interest ("present-at-hand"). A hammer is first revealed as an instrument with which one is hammering the nails. Dasein first meets a hammer in the

course of its circumspective concern *by using it*. The using of a hammer, however, is what prevents any grasping of its 'objective' characteristics; it conceals the hammer as an object of thought, as "present-at-hand."

The hammering does not simply have knowledge about the hammer's character as equipment, but it has appropriated this equipment in a way which could not possibly be more suitable. [...] The ready-to-hand is not grasped theoretically at all, nor is it itself the sort of thing that circumspection takes proximally as a circumspective theme. The peculiarity of what is proximally ready-to-hand is that, in its readiness-to-hand, it must, as it were, withdraw in order to be ready-to-hand quite authentically (69).

The objects manifest themselves to Dasein in their instrumentality without being seen *as* objects, suitable for one's speculative consideration. Obviously, not only instruments proper, such as hammer, can be instrumental in this sense. In the aim-directed disclosing activity of Dasein each and every instrument hides its 'presence' by pointing or referring to something else. The ultimate 'address' of this complex "chain of references or assignments" (74) is Dasein itself. Thus, for example, the picture on the wall is inconspicuous in its 'instrumentality' (as an ornament, decoration etc.), and its referential character (it 'refers' to the wall, which in turn may 'refer' to the house etc.). Nothing can be *said* about this picture at this point; Dasein merely uncovers the 'silent truth' of the picture.

In the course of Dasein's everyday activities, a 'ready-to-hand' instrument may show itself as lacking in one respect or another, "in a certain un-readiness-to-hand" (73). An object tends to "announce itself" in the modes of its 'deficiency,' which Heidegger analyzes into conspicuousness, obtrusiveness, and obstinacy (74). In the process of hammering the hammer may strike as being too heavy, or too light. The pen may strike as

being dry, or the paper – as being absent. When this failure occurs, the instrument first becomes conspicuous. It reveals itself as a ‘present-at-hand’ object open for one’s consideration. “Pure presence-at-hand announces itself in such equipment” (73). Dasein is now in a position to observe objects in their mere presence, as something laid before it. It is now in a position to understand worldly entities in their *otherness*. With this subject-object dichotomy emerges speculative knowledge – modern science.

This detailed account of Heidegger’s analysis of Dasein’s possible ways of being towards the entities within-the-world aims to prepare ground for further discussion of the essential limitations of Descartes’ ontology. At least two important implications of the above reasoning should be made clear here. Firstly, ‘presence-at-hand’, that is, an entity in its ‘objective’ presence, is not the only mode of its disclosing itself for Dasein. It reveals *some* truth about the object, but not the whole truth. Secondly, ‘objective’ presence is in fact a derivative mode of Being, the one which Dasein never encounters proximally.

Descartes, having confined himself from the very beginning to a “warm room” of untroubled contemplation, confronts the entities within-the-world in a mode of their presence-at-hand only. Choosing pure beholding as a privileged and superior attitude, he can only encounter things in the world in a certain manner. Since it is the only way of knowing that is recognized by Descartes, it becomes exclusive and intolerant to any other forms of experience. Pure apprehension naturally employs a mathematical model of knowledge as the most suited for the original stand, and only that which satisfies the requirements of the discipline can be recognized as real in any ultimate sense:

Mathematical knowledge is regarded by Descartes as the manner of apprehending entities which can always give assurance that their Being has been

securely grasped. If anything measures up in its own kind of Being to the Being that is accessible in mathematical knowledge, then it *is* in the authentic sense (Heidegger 95).

Thus Descartes determines the limits of the Being of the worldly entities beforehand. Reality and any ultimate significance are denied to the extent that things *are* in relation to man in everyday experience, since it fails to satisfy the requirements of certainty and measurability. On the Cartesian scientific model the practical or ethical value of a thing or an event is given a secondary status as something that simply adds up to the primary reality grasped by thinking. The *meanings* of the things within-the-world are pushed to the periphery of the scientific inquiry, as being ‘subjective’ and somewhat less than real. As we have seen, Heidegger maintains that this approach totally misinterprets human existence as we experience it, and imposes an artificial and impoverished paradigm on man’s understanding of the world.

The Being of the ‘world’ is, as it were, dictated to it in terms of a definite idea of Being which lies veiled in the concept of substantiality and in terms of the idea of a knowledge by which *such* entities are cognized. The kind of Being which belongs to entities within-the-world is something which they themselves might have been permitted to present; but Descartes does not let them do so (96).

Indeed, Descartes and especially his contemporary followers authoritatively “dictate” to nature their own preconceived idea of what reality is, and presumptuously expect nature to confirm it. Heidegger in the twentieth century was one of the few who challenged the deep-rooted stand of the ‘scientific outlook’ and its crucial presuppositions, which somehow turned into the unquestionable axioms in the minds of the many. In *Being and Time* he showed that the things of the world were not primarily grasped in their Being

by thinking, but were first encountered ‘thoughtlessly’ as useful, pleasurable, good or unpleasant in the course of Dasein’s circumspective concern. This mode of the world’s disclosure is primordial and indeed more significant for Dasein’s being. No ‘scientific’ description of a rose, however accurate and thorough, can ever exhaust its meaning for a person to whom it was given by a beloved. Surely, its meaning cannot be reduced to certain biological characteristics and classification of a plant known as rose. It derives its meaning and value, in fact, its phenomenologically experienced *reality*, from its partaking in a sophisticated chain of references in Dasein’s world. Precisely its referential nature, as it was stressed earlier, first prevents the ‘objective’ grasping of the rose as a plant, and only secondarily it may or may not appear as a separate entity of its own right. Any attempt to reverse this order, ascribing the primary significance to the ‘objective’ characteristics of the rose, and only secondary or additional value to its *role* in a *specific* human situation, does injustice to human experience and betrays a predefined notion of reality that seeks to explain the world in terms of universals (mathematical model), and disregards the particulars as less important.

It should be clear by now what Heidegger means when he charges the modern philosophy, which originates with Descartes, with “passing over” the world and the phenomenon of the “ready-to-hand” entities. In *Being and Time* he gives a concise summary of his criticism:

The world and Dasein and entities within-the-world are ontologically constitutive states which are closest to us; but we have no guarantee that we can achieve the basis for meeting up with these as phenomena by seemingly obvious procedure of starting with the Things of the world, still less by taking our

orientation from what is supposedly the most rigorous knowledge of entities. Our observations of Descartes should have brought us this insight (101).

The “seemingly obvious procedure” of scientific approach to the world does not guarantee our grasping of the full richness of the encountered reality. The “supposedly the most rigorous knowledge of entities”, that is, the scientific method, tends to overlook the most significant part of human life. We can perhaps safely acknowledge that if this insight were the only valuable philosophical contribution of *Being and Time*, it would still remain a landmark of our time.