

Heidegger's Critique of Descartes' Metaphysics

By A. Kadir Cucen

In this paper, my purpose is to discuss how the traditional metaphysics, especially in Descartes' philosophy of ontology, covers the question of being concerning clear and distinct idea of cogito. In order to explore it, first I would like to explain the definition of being or substance in Descartes' ontology within the relation of history of philosophy. Second I will explain Heidegger's critics of Descartes' interpretation of being. In conclusion, I will discuss both of them with contemporary aspect of metaphysics.

The concept of substance comes from the Greek philosophy. Descartes takes the concept of substance from Greek and Medieval philosophies. For instance, in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, substance is the concrete individual thing. For Heidegger, Descartes means by "substance" that by which "we can understand nothing else than an entity which is in such a way that it need no other entity in order to be."¹ Therefore, only God is a substance in this sense if He is understood as "*ens perfectissimum*"; and all other things can exist only by the help of the concourse of God. With regard to God, all other things are considered as "*ens creatum*". It is obvious that in Descartes division of substance, God is not an "*ens creatum*" substance, but *res cogito* and *res corporea* are "created and finite substances." Although Descartes applies the term substance to both substances (*ens perfectissimum* and *ens creatum*) univocally, Heidegger maintains that it does not apply univocally because one is infinite and the other one is finite. Heidegger says that although Descartes touches on a problem with which medieval ontology was constantly preoccupied, Descartes is far from behind the scholastics because Descartes defines the *res cogitans* ontologically as an *ens*; however, in Medieval ontology *ens* was fixed by understanding it as an *ens creatum*, and God, as an *ens infinitum*, was the *ens increatum*. Descartes touches on this distinction, but he does

¹. Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper and Row publ., 1962. p. 125.

not overcome this distinction. In accordance with Descartes' understanding of *ens creatum*, Heidegger maintains that Descartes takes *res cogito* and *res corporea* as “is-hood” or “thing-hood”. However, as Heidegger says, substance or Being is not “thinghood.”

According to Descartes, the ontological determination of *res extensa* is based on the concept of substantiality which is what Being means. Therefore, substantiality in this sense of independence can be possessed only by God. Heidegger says that the term of God is purely ontological, if it is understood as “*ens perfectissimum*”. On the other hand, all other things can exist only by the help of the concurrence of God. The being of everything other than God consists in being “*ens creatum*” In other words, every entity which is not God is “*ens creatum*”, but between these two kinds of existence, there is an infinite difference.

Heidegger points out that the term substance may be used for the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa* which are the finite substances. And also this term is applied to God which is the infinite substance. On the other hand, the term substance does not apply to God and to the creatures univocally because the meaning of Being or of substance must be clarified in terms of these three substance. What meaning is there to be attached to Being as used for each of the two kinds of substance, the one finite and the other infinite? Heidegger sees that at this point Descartes touches on a problem with which medieval ontology was constantly preoccupied. Being cannot univocally apply to both because there is an infinite difference between them, and also Being cannot be taken as just a name applied indifferently to both without itself possessing a general meaning. Descartes applies substantiality univocally to both created and to uncreated substances, and Heidegger says that “in both cases, 'Being' is understood. This positive sense in which Being signifies is one which the Schoolmen took as a signification 'by analogy', as distinguished from one which is univocal or merely homonymous.”² Medieval philosophy takes this problem from the analogy of Aristotle “in whom this problem is foreshadowed in prototypical form

². Ibid., p. 126.

just as at the very outset of Greek ontology, they established various kinds of analogy, so that even the 'schools' have different ways of taking the signification-function of 'Being'.³ In this respect, Heidegger thinks that Descartes is far behind the scholastics. Therefore, Descartes can be seen as evading the ontological problem in the concept of substantiality, as he fails to discuss the meaning of Being. The meaning of Being remains unclarified because of his understanding of Being as self-evident for the certainty of *cogito sum*.

The distinction between the “*res cogitans*” and “*res extensa*”, which means nature and spirit for the modern philosophy, remains indeterminate in its ontological foundation because Descartes uses the term “*Substantia*” for both “*ens perfectissimum*” and “*ens creatum*”. Substantiality means the ontological status of “*ens perfectissimum*” which is in need of no other being in order to exist, while it means the ontological status of “*ens creatum*” which depends on this “*ens perfectissimum*” (God) in order to exist. Therefore, being as substantiality has such an inflated meaning. Heidegger calls this “its meaning embraces an infinite difference.”⁴

Another critique of Descartes' substance is that we know substance by its attributes. In other words, what we know originates directly from the attributes of substance, but not from substances. For example, from Descartes, we know the essential nature of mind which is thought, but we do not know what exactly mind is. We know what extension is, but we do not know what the body is apart from its essential attributes. Therefore, in order to explain what the ontological determination of the *res corporea* is, what substantiality means has to be clarified. For Descartes, substances are known by their attributes, i.e., “substances become accessible in their attributes.”⁵ Heidegger says that “Extension is a state-of-Being constitutive for the entity we are talking about; it is that which must already “be” before any other ways in which Being is determined, so that these can “be” that they are. Extension must be

³. Ibid., p. 126.

⁴. Ibid., p. 125.

⁵. Ibid., p. 123.

“assigned” (zugewiesen) primarily to the corporeal Thing. The “world's” extension and substantiality (which itself is characterized by extension) are accordingly demonstrated by showing how all the other characteristics which this substance definitely possesses (especially *divisio, figura, motus*), can be conceived only as *modi* of *extensio*, while, on the other hand, *extensio sine figura vel motu* remains quite intelligible.⁸ Therefore, motion and shape are the *modus* of extension as Descartes shows in his analysis of hardness. According to Descartes, if all the properties and the qualities of the corporeal body can be removed from it, by itself meanwhile it remains entire, so that the nature of the corporeal body, viz., of extension, depends on none of them. In other words, the being of *res corporea* consists of extension, which remains unaltered, the same in the midst of all change, and hence constitutes the substantiality of this substance.

According to Heidegger, the modern ontological dualism of spirit and nature goes back to the Cartesian distinction between the *ego cogito* and the *res corporea*. For Descartes the word “*substantia*” denotes the Being of anything. Like the Greek concept of *ousia*, for Heidegger, the concept of *substantia* is also ambiguous; because it sometimes means “substantiality”, it sometimes means the substance or the entity itself. Consequently, according to Heidegger, there is an ambiguity of Descartes' use of *substantia*. Because Descartes defines the substantiality of the world as extension so he identifies extension with *res corporea*. And when the characteristics of the *res corporea* are taken away, extension remains. In other words, extension is the substantiality of the *res corporea* which is, for Descartes, a substance. The world is understood as such an extension in the Cartesian tradition.

Furthermore, Heidegger maintains that Descartes insists on the inaccessibility of substantiality in itself. In other words, substance cannot be first discovered merely from its being a thing which exists independently, for existence by itself is not observed by us. Therefore, substantiality is inaccessible but it can be determined by its attributes. For example, bodies and minds can be known in terms of extension and thinking.

Heidegger maintains that the Cartesian ontology of the world in which Being lies in extension is not concerned with the phenomena of the world, and it does not succeed in determining the nature of the entity with-in the world. According to Heidegger, Descartes' ontological account of the world leads us into obscurity because the radical separation of "God", of the "I", and of the "world" still remains unclear, and because Descartes takes his basic ontological concepts from traditional sources and he does not provide any positive critique. Heidegger says that "he (Descartes) has made it impossible to lay bare any primordial ontological problematic of Dasein; this has inevitably obstructed his view of the phenomenon of the world, and has made it possible for the ontology of the 'world' to be compressed into that of certain entities within-the-world."⁶

Furthermore, Descartes not only wants to formulate the problem of the "I" and of the "world", he also claims to solve it in a radical way. He sees the entities with-in the world as material nature, so he makes an ontological basis for the entities with-in-the-world which is understood as Things of Nature. However, according to Heidegger, in this sense, Descartes restricts the question of the world to that of Things of Nature as those entities with-in-the-world which are approximately accessible.⁷ For Heidegger, traditional ontology causes Descartes not to see his way into a deeper grasp of the problem of an ontology of Dasein, and he departs from the phenomena of the world. Consequently, Descartes takes the Being of Dasein in the same manner in which he takes the Being of the *res corporea*.

Descartes' understanding of extension can be interpreted as an essential attribute of the corporeal substance which is grasped in terms of a system of coordinates in three dimensions. Moreover, Descartes understands the concept of "*res extensa*" in the thematic sense because extension is especially suited to mathematical determination; therefore, the mathematization of extension leads Descartes to understand Being as substantiality in the theoretical attitude. In Descartes' system,

⁶. *ibid.*, p. 131.

⁷. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

extension is defined through three dimensions which are located in a co-ordinate system. In other words, entities are conceived as extended in a system of Cartesian co-ordinates. Consequently, we can only clearly and distinctly grasp the entities in their extension but not in their secondary status, such as their colors and hardness.

If the Cartesian definition of the world is ontologically in error, then for Heidegger, the traditional ontology must be re-interpreted from the very beginning. In order to show this, Heidegger asks “which kind of Being that belongs to Dasein we should fix upon as giving us an appropriate way of access to those entities whose Being as *extensio* Descartes equates the Being of the world.”⁸ For Descartes, the only proper mode of access to it is the faculty of knowing, *intellectio*, in the sense of mathematical-physical knowledge.

The aim of Descartes' method is to reach truth and certainty. His faith in mathematics forced him to establish a foundation for the entirety of human knowledge. Descartes is aware that the method of traditional logic is a deductive method which is useful for the orderly arrangement of acquired knowledge, but it is not useful for the acquisition of new knowledge. Therefore, Descartes asserts the analytic method in which he builds the entire edifice of human knowledge. He owes his method to the idea of a universal mathematics. For Descartes, radical methodic doubt is the path leading to the indubitable certainty of the cogito. “*Cogito ergo sum*” constitutes the incontrovertible starting point of the universal mathematics which Descartes wants to build.

Heidegger says that “mathematical knowledge is regarded by Descartes as the one manner of apprehending entities which can always give assurance that their being has been securely grasped.”⁹ Because the entities, which are accessible in the mathematical knowledge, are those which always are what they are, and the being of mathematical entities in the world must lie in something that is permanently enduring, as “*remanens capax mutationum*”. Therefore, Being of the “world” is

⁸. Ibid., p. 128.

⁹. Ibid., p. 128.

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 knowledge. For this reason, Heidegger thinks that Descartes switches over philosophically from the development of traditional ontology to modern mathematical physics and its transcendental foundation. This switch covers up the meaning of Being, and epistemological grasp of concealed Being gives us ontical, conceptual, and theoretical explanations of being-present-at-hand. This is not the aim of fundamental ontology; therefore, Descartes' understanding of Being must be destroyed in its ontological foundation.

Heidegger charges Descartes with being a prisoner of the Greeks because of his giving the unquestioned privilege to “*noein*” and the unquestioned concept of Being which is understood as a present-at-hand. He further suggests that Descartes takes over the problems of the Medieval metaphysics, i.e., the concept of substance, and its terminology. Heidegger claims that starting with Descartes, the idea that nature has no other mode of being than substance which is the constant persistence of present-at-hand dominates the ontology of the modern philosophy. Therefore, for Heidegger, modern philosophy takes Being ontically as present-at-hand rather than analyzing its ontological foundation.

On the other hand, one can argue that Heidegger's critique of the Cartesian understanding of being is an oversimplified critique because of his interpretation of *res cogito* in terms of *res extensa* and seeing everything as an extended thing. First of all, Heidegger's reading of Descartes is one-sided and very minimal, because he pays attention only to Descartes' theory of substance, and he interprets the Cartesian understanding of Being in terms of his interpretation of the theory of substance, especially in terms of *res extensa*. For example, in *Being and Time* Heidegger develops a critique of ontologies based on the notion of substance as a means of explicating the central problems in traditional ontologies, and this is accomplished primarily by means of an analysis of the formulations of Descartes. Descartes' understanding of Being is not only based on the theory of substance, but it is also based on the clear and distinct idea which is founded firstly in *cogito* because

Descartes' understanding of Being can be grounded on the most clear and distinct knowledge of *cogito*, but on not the theory of substance. Furthermore, Heidegger, simplifies Descartes' "*cogito sum*" as a simple thing present-at-hand, but for Descartes, we think, "*cogito sum*" is an abstract subject which cannot be related to something present-at-hand because it is not an extension. In this account, "*cogito*" cannot be interpreted in the same level with the concept of "*sum*", because "*cogito*" is a mental substance which one cannot reduce to a material substance.

Although Heidegger maintains that Descartes has simply "the most extreme tendency" of a certain ontology and raises the question of the Being, Descartes raises it in the limited sense of the Being of nature. Because the word "Being" in Descartes' philosophy is not gone beyond "representedness." ("Vorgestelltheit") and the "*cogito*" is interpreted in the old framework of the "*ens creatum*". Being may be thematized as a corporeal substance in Descartes' philosophy. Descartes' system is the discovery of the way the Being of the present-at-hand in the modern philosophy. Therefore, Descartes means by "*sum res cogitans*" as "I am being whose mode to be consists in representing in such a way that the representing copresents the one who is representing into representedness."¹⁰

Although for Heidegger the middle ages seem to be a bridge between Plato and Aristotle and the modern times that begin with Descartes, Descartes is the most determinate element in the completion of the forgetfulness of Being in its historical destiny. The metaphysical task of Descartes was the liberation of man for the sake of man's own freedom as certitude of self-determination in order to create a metaphysical ground. Heidegger states that "the essence of the modern age can be seen in the fact that man frees himself from the bonds of the middle ages in freeing himself to himself."¹¹ This liberation of the man in the modern age includes subjectivism, individualism, and objectivism, but the subjectivism of the modern age is one-sided subjectivism and is dependent on the epistemology of the "*cogito sum*."

¹⁰. Robert L. Bernasconi. "Descartes in the History of Being. Another Bad Novel." p. 93.

¹¹. Martin Heidegger. "Age of the World Picture." *The Question Concerning Technology and other Essays*. Translated by William Levitt. New York: Harper and Row Publ., 1977. p. 127

For Richardson, Descartes' ontology provides a basis for an understanding of present-at-hand; so his ontology guides or underlines his epistemology. "Entities are, for Descartes, substances, and the Being of entities is substantiality."¹² The theoretical position of modern philosophy started with Descartes' discovery of present-at-hand entities in which epistemology plays a great role of the transparent access to things in themselves. That is to say that epistemology determines its objects as they are in themselves; therefore, Being depends on its epistemological grasp rather than its ontological grasp. For example, Descartes supposes that his ontology emerges out of his epistemological doubt as a conclusion¹³ because Descartes believes that it is possible to make a beginning within the everyday beliefs and concerns, so that we can reach the certainty of "*res cogito*" within the theoretical attitude of doubting. The thinking substance occurs as a crucial stage in the self validation of the theoretical attitude.¹⁴

Although Heidegger accepts Descartes' standing at the beginning of the modern philosophy and is understood in terms of a dominance of the mathematical science of nature,¹⁵ Heidegger also challenges the claim that Descartes' philosophy lacks mastery of the basic problems of Being.¹⁶ It is because Heidegger asserts that Descartes does not have an ontological foundation of "*cogito sum*", and that he takes over the terminology of medieval ontology. So Descartes is always far behind.¹⁷ All modern philosophies try to solve this problem in their epistemologies. Contrary to these epistemological epochs of modern philosophy, Heidegger turns the question back to its origin in ontology. In other words, the forgetfulness of Being must be interpreted in its ontological difference. Philosophy must return to its original place; Heidegger raises the question of the meaning of Being in an ontological rather than in

¹². John Richardson. *Existential Epistemology: A Heideggerian Critique of Descartes Project*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986. p. 76.

¹³. Ibid., p. 86.

¹⁴. Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁵. Martin Heidegger. *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*. Trans. and Intr. by Albert Hofstadter. Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1982. pp. 29-30.

¹⁶. Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*. p. 84.

¹⁷. Ibid., p. 93.

an epistemological context. Therefore, Heidegger puts philosophy back into ontology from the epistemology begun by Descartes.

In the Heideggerian destruction of the historical destiny of ontologies, the destruction of the Cartesian understanding of Being links the ancient and the medieval metaphysics to the Kantian doctrine of being in which Heidegger tries to see the roots of the previous ontologies. Consequently, one can be most faithful to the spirit of the destruction if one simply tries to understand the general character of the forgetfulness of Being's moment from ancient to modern times with Descartes. We argued that Descartes' understanding of Being in terms of Heidegger's interpretation of it reveals a part of Being which is the entities presently-at-hand. Since Descartes' position represents at best the theory of substance in which Heidegger mainly focuses his destruction of the history of ontology on this point, the example of Descartes' "cogito sum" is the best extreme case for our discussion of Heidegger's case.