**Death, Sex, and the Body: Phenomenology and Foucault**

**Handout on *Being and Time*, §§19-21 (Division I, Chapter Three B): “Differentiating the analysis of worldliness from the interpretation of the world in Descartes.”**

(This document is a combined “handout” and “worksheet”, with six exercises distributed throughout the text. Any single exercise [or the combination of exercises 1 and 2] would be more than enough for an analytic response paper or two.)

In this sub-chapter (Division I, Chapter Three B), Heidegger employs his analysis (in Chapter Three A) of intraworldly entities and the world of Dasein as being-in-the-world to take on a broad, traditional, and still very prevalent view of the relation between human beings and physical entities. We can think of this relation in terms of perceiving things with our senses. In this critique, he certainly had Husserl (among others) in mind, as marginal note 67 at the bottom of p. 98 indicates, but chose René Descartes instead because he didn’t want to make it obvious that he was criticizing some deeply-held view of his mentor.

Here's a rough sketch of Descartes’ view of sense-perception, various forms of which are still dominant in the philosophy of mind today. There are three basic components of this view, which we can refer to as (1) metaphysical dualism, (2) the view of perceiving things through our senses that can be characterized as “the myth of the given,” and (3) cognitivism.

(1) **Metaphysical dualism** (dealt with primarily in §19: “Determining the ‘world’ as *res extensa*”):

*Metaphysics* attempts to lay out what basic kinds of entities there are. Metaphysical dualism maintains that there are two basic kinds:

1. thinking entities (which Descartes calls “*res cogitans*” “thinking things”);

and

1. physical entities, which are “extended” in the three spatial dimensions of length, breadth, and height (hence Descartes’ term *res extensa*: “extended thing”). The shape and position of any physical thing can be plotted on the three-dimensional Cartesian (note the name!) coordinate system with the *x*, *y*, and *z* axes. And we can describe the motion of any physical thing by adding in the fourth dimension, time.

(Some philosophers, such as Husserl, think that there’s also a third kind of thing: (c) Platonic universals, such as the “forms” of perfect mathematical concepts: points, lines, etc.) For our purposes, we’ll ignore this view, which is called “Platonism.”)

For Descartes, what you are is *only* a thinking thing, not an extended thing. This means that your body is just another physical thing within the world, and hence not really part of you. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), he argues that this is the case because you can be certain only that you exist as your mind, but you can’t be certain that your body exists. His argument that you can be certain that your mind exists is the famous: “I think, therefore I am.” Indeed, it’s so famous that you might have heard it in the original Latin: “*cogito, ergo sum*.” For Descartes, whenever you experience mental activity (thinking, receiving sensations, etc.), you can be absolutely certain both that these things are going on, and that they’re going on in *your* mind. Thus even if you try to doubt that your mind exists, you can see that, since this mental activity of doubting exists, you must exist as the one doing the doubting.

As for bodily, physical things (*res corpora*), you can never be absolutely certain that they exist. For all I know, I might be just a brain in a vat, hooked up to various life-supporting devices (which pump blood, supply us with sensations, and receive signals from the neurons that control our muscles, etc.). All you can be certain of is your *idea* of what they would be if they existed, and this is that they *would* be three-dimensional things moving around in space and time. For Descartes, this is the basis of mathematical physics, so he thought that you could know at least a lot of the laws of physics *a priori*, i.e., without ever observing things with your senses.

Heidegger finds it very significant that what Descartes points to as the *essence* of physical things is what it is in them that’s *constantly present* (pp. 95-96, 99), i.e., what they’re like just insofar as eternally true laws of mathematical physics apply to them at all times and places. Practical uses or sensory qualities thus don’t belong to physical things as they are in themselves. Heidegger believes that we somehow have an inclination to think that what’s “really” real is just what’s constantly present. Is this, perhaps, the result of our tendency to flee from the finitude that’s at the core of our being?

For Descartes, thinking things and physical things are almost completely different; that is, they have almost completely different attributes, or properties. Thinking things take up no space and (somehow) don’t even move around in space, and extended things don’t think. The only thing that these two kinds of entities have in common is that they are both *substances*. “Sub-stance” comes from the Latin for “standing under.” The picture is that they are what underlie the changes that they undergo: the activities that they perform and that cause things to happen, and the things that the actions of (usually) other things cause to happen to them. In order for substances to be like this, they must persist through time, and this temporal duration is pretty much all that’s common to mind and matter.

[Heidegger’s first criticism of Descartes can be found in §20 (“The **f**oundations of [Descartes’] ontological determination of the ‘world’”). Here, he argues that Descartes doesn’t adequately discuss the *being* of substances in general. Instead, he only discusses how body and mind are *different*, not what they have in common. (Note that Heidegger makes exactly the same criticism of Husserl at *HCT*, pp. 108-114 and 128-130.) Actually, I confess that I think Heidegger’s criticism might not be completely correct. After all, Descartes *does* discuss what mind and matter have in common: both of them are things that underlie the activities in which they cause things to happen, and both also underlie the changes that other things effect in them. Finally, for Descartes, this implies that both mental and physical things persist through time. Now admittedly, Descartes also believes in an infinite, perfect substance: God. And God lacks two attributes common to finite, created things. First, nothing outside God can act on God, causing any change in Him; and God’s eternity is usually understood not as persisting through time, but as existing *outside* of time. Nevertheless, Descartes does makes one very important assumption, stretching from the Middle Ages up to now: to be a substance is to be capable of *acting*, i.e., *causing* things to happen (usually in things other than the substance that’s acting). The ultimate example of such action is God employing his omnipotence to create the universe out of nothing. Why the being of entities must be understood in terms of causation is indeed a good question.]

*Exercise 1 (to be combined with exercise 2)*: Can you think of a reason whysomeone would think that what it is to be an entity must be understood in terms of causal actions? (Heidegger touches on this question in §20. The foundations of this ontological determination of the ‘world.”) Here’s a hint as to Heidegger’s “diagnosis” of the causal view of things in the lecture-course *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, which he delivered in 1927, right after the publication of *Being and Time*. For Heidegger, we have a tendency to focus our attention on *handy* entities, and handy entities are the sorts of things that we create and that we use to create other things. For some reason, we tend to overgeneralize this kind of being of entities, applying it to the being of *all* entities. Also, our nearly exclusive focus on *entities* directs our attention to a crucial aspect of our being: the *world* in being-in-the-world. What do you make of this “diagnosis” of philosophical interpretations of things as essentially producers and receivers of causes?

*Exercise 2 (to be combined with exercise 1):* Can you think of a potential problem with attempts to describe our basic relations to things in terms of causality? For example, is the most illuminating way to describe *all* the ways in which we encounter other people *necessarily* as inter-*acting* with them, i.e., our doing things *to* them and their doing things *to* us? (In Chapter Four [§§25-27] Heidegger will give a phenomenological description of how we “care for” others.)

(2) **“The myth of the given.”** This is a very common view of how we perceive things with our senses, already described and criticized by Heidegger in §13: “Exemplifying being-in in a founded mode: knowing the world” (pp. 59-63). In keeping with metaphysical dualism, you’re supposed to be *just* your mind, conceived as a non-physical “box,” or “bucket,” that somehow “contains” ideas that only you can have. Some of these ideas are *sensations*, i.e., private, subjective, images, tones, etc., presumably somehow caused by external things causing events to occur in our sense-organs, nerves, brain, etc. Other such ideas (such as those of space and time, as Descartes thought) might be *a priori*, i.e., not derived from the experience of our senses. The American philosopher Wilfred Sellars labeled this view “the myth of the given,” since it maintains that *all* that’s “given” to you are *appearances*, i.e., ideas, which *might* turn out to be appearances of physical things that might perhaps have caused our sensations, or, on the other hand (as is the case with illusions), might not. According to the myth of the given, that is, we are just our minds, and our minds have no direct “access” to the physical things that we seem to perceive.

In any case, the myth of the given tells us that perceiving physical objects, “external” to our subjective minds, is a highly indirect process. It *first* begins with consciousness of sensations, *then* performs various mental operations on them (combining them, abstracting them, etc.), and *finally* somehow *conceives* of them *as* appearances *of* physical objects that presumably cause these sensations to appear in your mind. Husserl’s description of *internal* time-consciousness supplements the myth of the given with an admittedly quite insightful description of how we follow sets of sensations as they move through time. Nevertheless, Husserl still remains firmly within the grip of the myth of the given.

Heidegger rejects such philosophical theories of sense-perception, maintaining instead that, because we’re *essentially* being-in-the world, we’re *always essentially* “out there,” *at* the physical, often “handy,” entities that we deal with on an everyday basis. We’ve already seen him saying things like this: “even in [such ways of perceiving entities as] taking-in, preserving, and retaining, knowing Dasein, *as Dasein, remains outside*” – i.e., in its world (p. 62). He will go on to say things like this: “An extremely artificial and complicated attitude is already needed in order to ‘hear’ a ‘pure sound.’ But that we at first hear motorcycles and cars is the phenomenal evidence that Dasein as being-in-the-world at each moment already dwells *at* what’s handy within the world, and at first not at all at ‘sensations,’ whose blooming, buzzing confusion would first have to be formed in order to furnish the springboard from which the subject jumps off to finally reach a ‘world.’ As essentially understanding, Dasein is at first at what’s understood” (p. 164).

At this point, it would be good to look again at his discussion of *appearances* as a kind of phenomenon on pp. 29-31. You’ll find that his claim that the concept of *phenomenon* is more basic than that of *appearance* to be the basis of a subtle criticism of the myth of the given. One way to read this discussion is as implying that physical things can *themselves* be *phenomena* for us. That is, it’s physical things, not sensations, that are what is primarily given to us when we perceive things with our senses. Although of course we can be mistaken about things (something that Heidegger calls an “illusion” [pp. 28-29]), physical things “show up,” or “show themselves” directly to us; and this “showing up” is Heidegger’s definition of “phenomenon” (p. 28). When we say that something – say, flushed cheeks – is an *appearance*, what we mean is that the flushed cheeks are themselves directly phenomena, but that they indicate something, such as a disease, that doesn’t show up directly, but only *appear* in the phenomenon of the flushed cheeks. Unless physical things were themselves phenomena, it would make no sense to speak of appearances, especially when these appearances are construed along the lines of the myth of the given: as private, subjective “ideas.”

*Exercise 3*: Apply what Heidegger says about “appearances” on pp. 29-31 as a critique of the myth of the given. Do you think he’s successful here in arguing that because the concept of a phenomenon is more basic than the concept of an appearance, appearances presuppose such phenomena as physical things showing up to us? Explain why or why not.

(3) **Cognitivism** (dealt with primarily in §13: “Exemplifying being-in in a founded mode: knowing the world”; and §21: “Hermeneutic discussion of the Cartesian ontology of the ‘world’”. **Please note that “hermeneutic” means “interpretive.”**). Cognitivism comprises a family of philosophical theories about how we understand the physical world, doing things like negotiating our way around physical objects without bumping into them. The basic picture is this. According to cognitivism, our most fundamental way of relating to the “external” world is through *knowing* it, cognitively (hence the term). This is supposed to work more or less as follows. We relate to physical things primarily by forming “mental maps” of the shapes and locations of all the (relevant) physical things in our vicinity. The shape and location of our body is just one of these physical things on the map. To create such a mental map, we would have to combine an *enormous* number of *beliefs* (i.e., cognitions) about our surroundings. For example, we might include a table in our map as follows: at time *t*, there’s a horizontally-oriented object centered at these three-dimensional physical coordinates *x*, *y*, *z*, and that’s 1.1 meters tall, 0.9 meters wide, and 2.3 meters long. In order to reliably move around the table, we’d then also have to place our body into this mental map, complete with an approximation of the speed and direction with which it travels through physical space. As you can see, such mental maps would treat physical things essentially as is done by mathematical physics, something that Descartes helped pioneer. Thus Heidegger describes cognitivism as committed to the following view: “The only and genuine access to these entities is knowing, *intellectio* [cognition]: indeed, in the sense of mathematical-physical knowledge” (p. 95).

There are major difficulties with cognitivism. One is that it’s highly unlikely that we actually have such huge numbers of beliefs that are somehow accessible to us (even though unconsciously) at an instant, in what computer science calls “random access memory” (RAM). It’s also highly unlikely that when we move around a room our minds have a “processing power” that’s sufficiently fast for us to be able to operate on these beliefs to allow us to negotiate physical objects in the usually smoothly-functioning way that we do. Ultimately, for Heidegger, cognitivism is just bad phenomenology; it simply imposes a particular philosophical theory on our moving around successfully in the world, without bothering to check whether it actually provides an accurate description of what it’s like for us to do this.

According to cognitivism, all of our “practical” ways of using physical things are *based*, or *founded*, on our maps of the positions and locations of things construed as mere physical objects (again, more or less as they are thought of by mathematical physics). Cognitivism, that is, “posit[s] thingly reality as the basic level” (p. 99) of how we have access to entities within the world. On this cognitivist picture, after we have constructed our mental maps, we then “add” practical “values” to certain things located in physical space (cf. pp. 63, 68, 99-100, 149-150). We’d do things like judge (which is a kind of cognitive belief) that this thing at that location, with that shape, and weighing 1.1 kilograms would be “valuable” to use if I needed to hammer some boards together. And we’d also have to conceive of “hammering,” “boards,” etc., in terms of their merely physical shapes, locations, weights, speeds, etc. Ultimately, cognitivism would attribute our success in dealing with things practically to our having a truly massive number of true beliefs, including many beliefs that we can justify sufficiently for them to count as *knowledge*.

*Exercise 4*: Explain Heidegger’s criticism on pp. 98-100 of Descartes’ cognitivist theory of how we deal with things practically. Do you find it successful? Explain why or why not.

One difficulty that this cluster of the three traditional and still-prevalent views generates is what is known as “the problem of knowledge of the external world.” The “problem” gets started by assuming (1) metaphysical dualism – that we’re one kind of substance, and the physical world is another kind of substance. What, then, could the relation of these two substances possibly be to each other (except, for Descartes, that they’re both finite and were both created by God)? Metaphysical dualism sits very well with (2) the “myth of the given,” since if we are nothing but our minds, then presumably nothing can be given to us directly except for private, subjective “ideas” that our mind “contains.” If we combine these two assumptions with (3) cognitivism, then we’re left with what would appear to be a major philosophical problem. Our only reliable relation with the “external world” is supposed to be through knowledge. But since the external world is never directly given to our minds, how could we ever possibly know what it’s like or even whether it – including our bodies – exists at all? Perhaps we can know mathematics, and maybe even mathematical physics, for certain, but how could we ever know that there are any physical things to which we could apply these kinds of knowledge? (Heidegger’s main discussion of this “problem” can be found in §43 [pp. 200-212]: “Dasein, worldliness, and **r**eality”.)

*Exercise 5* (a broadened version of exercise 4 above): Sketch out the basic lines of Heidegger’s phenomenological description of our everyday use of equipment in §15 (“The being of the entities encountered in the environment”) (pp. 66-72, and pp. 83-85 of §18 (“Deployment and meaningfulness: the worldliness of the world”). How is this description supposed to show the shortcomings of cognitivism? Do you think it succeeds? Explain why or why not.

*Exercise 6 (particularly important!):* As mentioned above, Heidegger on pp. 95-96 and p. 99 expresses deep skepticism that Descartes is right to maintain that the most fundamental ways in which we’re directed to physical things are through our intellectual knowledge of the laws of mathematical physics, which apply just to what’s *constantly present* in these things. But does this *phenomenological* claim imply the *metaphysical* (or even physical) claim that physical things in themselves are *not* really as they’re conceived by mathematical physics? Why or why not?