

DESCARTES, HUME, KANT AND DIDEROT:
THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF THE SELF
AND NATURE

In every hypothesis of reason, error may lurk unnoticed, but
a discovery of sense cannot be at odds with the truth.
... Nature did not make human brains first, and then
construct things according to their capacity of understanding,
but she first made things in her own fashion and then so
constructed the human understanding that it, though at the
price of exertion, might ferret out a few of her secrets.

Galileo Galilei*

In two lectures delivered at the Sorbonne, in 1929, Husserl introduced ideas which transformed his earlier position on transcendental phenomenology from a world of isolated ideas into a world community of intersubjective individuals. The observations and insights made in the lectures were amplified later in his *Cartesian Meditations*. In it, Husserl acknowledged Descartes as having initiated the necessary “impulse” to transform “an already developing phenomenology into a new kind of transcendental philosophy.” This kind of phenomenology, for Husserl, both embraced neo-Cartesianism and, appropriately, rejected certain fundamental tenets espoused in Descartes’ original *Meditations*. Husserl recalled for us the ultimate objective of the *Meditations* was to “reform” and transform philosophy into a “science grounded on an absolute foundation.” Hence, “the need for a radical rebuilding that satisfies the idea of philosophy as the all-inclusive unity of the sciences within the unity of such an absolute rational grounding. With Descartes, this demand gives rise to a philosophy turned toward the subject himself or herself. The turn to the subject is made at two significant levels.” On the first level, philosophical reflection leads to an “overthrow” and “rebuilding” of all the sciences that hitherto had been accepted. The second level, through the process of doubting, leads the “mediator” along the path of pursuing a “method” by which to lay subsequent “doubts” to rest. In the person of Descartes, according to Husserl, philosophy initiated a “radical new beginning”: a new set of problems had

arisen, and it is as the first to face these problems that he had come to be called "the father of modern philosophy."¹

In the history of philosophy, Descartes secured his place as the first modern critical thinker. In the history of science, his importance lies in the fact that he was the first to construct a scientific system, which conflicted at almost every point with Aristotelian principles. This systematic unitary science, so characteristic of the seventeenth through the eighteenth centuries, had reached a decline since the middle of the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, to which Husserl referred as the "unhappy present," the following queries were raised: "is not our situation similar to the one encountered by Descartes in his youth? If so, then is not this a fitting time to renew his radicalness, the radicalness of the beginning philosopher... ." Husserl concluded his lectures with two well-known adages attributed to Socrates and Augustine: "the Delphic motto, 'Know thyself!' has gained a new signification. Positive science is a science lost in the world. I must lose the world by *epoche*, in order to regain it by a universal self-examination. '*Noli foras ire*,' says Augustine, '*in te redi, in interiore homine habitat veritas*.'" ["Do not wish to go out; go back into yourself. Truth dwells in the inner man."] ²

To comprehend Descartes' position, and by extension, Husserl's response to his position, we must ascertain how, for reasons only in part philosophical, a new view of the self and a new view of nature had developed, demanding a reconsideration of the problem of knowledge. In his later writings, the concept of phenomenology, for Husserl, changed. At the time of his *Cartesian Meditations* and *The Crisis of European Sciences*, Husserl proclaimed that scientific knowledge can be understood only to the extent that we first understand the notion, *Lebenswelt*. The study of that lived world and of our experience of it, of "ego-and life-relatedness," becomes the primary consideration of phenomenology. Similarly, in his later writings, Descartes' ego lost its abstract, absolute status as it became "correlative" to the world of experience. We will examine these tendencies in Descartes' later writings, and their broader implication for eighteenth century thinkers.

Through the general characterization of Greek philosophy from the fourth century B.C.E, the individual and nature were inwardly related. The soul, Aristotle taught, realizes itself in and through the body. Aristotle defined the soul as "the first actuality of a natural body with organs," the point of departure for the issues with which we are concerned. The issues pertain to "whether the faculties are really distinct from the soul itself," and the related question: "whether the entire soul is present in the whole body and in each of its parts." Aristotle and his followers among Renaissance natural philosophers defined the soul as the life principle of the individual body, the principle