Husserl’s Neo-Cartesianism

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In *Cartesian Meditations* Husserl describes the relation between transcendental phenomenology and Cartesianism as follows:

one might almost call transcendental phenomenology a neo-Cartesianism, even though it is obliged—and precisely by its radical development of Cartesian motifs—to reject nearly all the well-known doctrinal content of the Cartesian philosophy.¹

The radicalizations constituting the Cartesian way to phenomenology which I shall discuss involve the replacement of Cartesian doubt by phenomenological epoché since the problem of the world is a clarification of sense rather than a criterion for existence, and the replacement of the Cartesian empirical ego by the transcendental ego to escape the circle involved in grounding the sense of mundaneity upon a likewise mundane existent.² In this way Husserl can call transcendental phenomenology a neo-Cartesianism.

Commentators have been divided concerning Husserl’s appraisal. Ricoeur argues that since Husserl does not recognize the essential grounding polarity of the cogito and god in Descartes’ philosophy he produces a non-Cartesian rather than a radicalized Cartesian philosophy.³ Thévenez claims that the Husserlian transcendental reduction and Cartesian doubt are radically opposed due to Husserl’s failure to see the metaphysical thrust of Descartes’ procedure. Husserl is wrong to think that Descartes’ metaphysics commences with the mundane res cogitans. Its true beginning is the evil genius phase of the doubt, to which Husserl pays no attention.⁴ According to Kuspit there is a similarity of method
but a dissimilarity of goal. Converging in methodic doubt, Descartes achieves a “sophisticated objectivism,” whereas Husserl achieves a “transcendental subjectivism.” Kern sees a disanalogy at the outset between Cartesian doubt and phenomenological epoché and reduction since the ego performing the epoché and reduction is beyond the natural attitude adopted by the doubting ego. Husserl’s philosophy is “scarcely Cartesian at all” except for the “general and vague parallel” involved in seeking apodictic evidence. Fulton, after citing four Cartesian antecedents of phenomenological themes—the regulative idea of first philosophy as queen of the sciences, self-evidence as the criterion of certainty, subjective philosophical method, and the ontological argument—stresses that the incommensurates concerning these themes in Husserl and Descartes arise from Husserl’s “forced interpretation” of Descartes, combining an acceptance of Cartesian method and a rejection of Cartesian metaphysics. Gurwitsch agrees with Fulton that for doctrinal reasons the Cartesian discovery of transcendental subjectivity would have been both startling and undesirable. Nonetheless, “Descartes took the sort of preliminary steps that led Husserl to the transcendental problem.” The aim of the present essay is a partial vindication of Husserl’s neo-Cartesianism by disclosing continuities between Husserl and Descartes of a substantive as well as methodic type which have been overlooked by Husserl and commentators alike. These continuities concern the relation between doubt and epoché, empirical and transcendental ego.

The core of philosophy for both Husserl and Descartes is rational autonomy. This is the norm guiding Husserl’s move from the natural attitude to transcendental subjectivity via phenomenological epoché and the parallel movement in Descartes from the teaching of nature to the natural light through doubt. Each breaks with prejudice and prevailing modes of thought to find an Archimedean point of rationality for both thought and action. Descartes overcomes the late Renaissance combination of Aristotle and Scholasticism in order to install a new scientific metaphysics. Husserl reacts against late nineteenth century naturalism, scientism, and historicism in an effort to return reason to itself as transcendental consciousness. Unlike in Descartes, the positive sciences are neither rejected nor reconstructed, but rather interrogated as to their meaning. The Husserlian ego is thus a ground of meaning, whereas Descartes’ res cogitans grounds a scientific theory of being. Kern cites the Crisis, p. 189, in support of this interpretation: “The point is not to secure objectivity but to understand it.” The Husserlian epoché is thus