The Law of the Origin in the Ontology of Consciousness (Descartes' Third Meditation)

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Consciousness is a light which illuminates the world from one end to another; everything which goes off into the past is recalled or recovered by history

—Emmanuel Levinas

I

The history of law is a history of finitude, which would be only one of the many histories of finitude, of the human condition or ontology. This irreducible point escapes those who invest all their efforts in understanding law through the scope of *legitimacy* – how does the law come to calculate, decide, institute, pronounce and effect? By what right? On what foundation, origin, universalising pretext, does it so act? If we abandon this line of questioning, the pursuance of which would only lead us through a gyre of self-referential dilemmas circumventing the concept of 'origin', it becomes clear that it is precisely the role of the *origin* in its law-configuring mode that problematises what law can and does do, that is to say, what law is. But, even having isolated this theoretical agenda, there are no obvious signposts to navigate one's journey into this 'law-configuring origin'. The *origin* does not present itself as a construct, a system with its own programme, or a concept with conventional points of access. It is not even

certain which questions one should be asking. One might articulate the *law of the origin* as that which makes possible the iterability of law, and somehow we are back to archaeological inquiries, as though there is a singular historical logic to law that writes its way towards a birth.

Instead of working on a trace of a concept that idiomatically represents itself exactly through this trace, we should investigate the embryonic space by which the *origin* comes to see the light of day: the space of consciousness. Such a project would efface all of the presuppositions inherent in asking *original* questions since it would set up the *origin* as the condition of thinking rather than the object of thought; in this vein, its mode of operation (founding, repeating, conserving) comes to constitute the *law of the origin*. The rationalist programme embraced by Descartes in his Third Meditation to destroy and reconstruct consciousness from the ground up confronts this very same problem of the *origin*; in it we witness the ways in which the *origin* pervades all aspects of Descartes' philosophy of apperception, including the attempt to overcome the law which ensures its existence and penetration.

II

The immanence that inheres in consciousness, otherwise referred to as *presence*, operates as the originary point of all signification. The Cartesian Cogito is the paradigm of this relation. Through a mechanism of sceptical inquiry it places into play the *a priori* end of certainty as the condition of knowledge proper. This is the case despite the fact that the sceptical process, the moving force for the proof of the Cogito's existence, is never itself accorded

the philosophical benefits of doubt – why should I not also doubt the scepticism that inculpates me in the doubting of my existence?

The third of Descartes' *Meditations* is situated in a precarious location as regards the logic of the entire epistemology. It proceeds with, as the necessary starting point, the proof which precedes it, that is, the existence of the Cogito (First and Second Meditations); at the same time, the proof of the existence of God is implicated as the inoculative condition of the Cogito. There is a confluence of solipsism and metaphysics such that God is conceived as the principle of self-certainty pre-empting the self. Let us analyse the rationality overseeing this problematic.

1. What is the relation that inheres in consciousness? It is the Cogito's encounter with the Infinite, the incommensurable of God. This is the crux of the First and Second Meditations. And it is conceived as an encounter that is primordial to thinking: 'I have long had fixed in my mind the belief that an all-powerful God existed by whom I have been created such as I am' (First Meditation); 'I have in me the notion of the infinite earlier than the finite – to wit, the notion of God before that of myself' (Third Meditation) (Descartes 1986: 147, 166). The primordial encounter, of myself with the Infinite, founds the Cogito's capacity to prove its existence. Once this proof is executed, proof of the existence of God follows, and it follows directly from the premise of the Cogito's verified presence. However, the existence of God is merely an intellectual necessity, in the sense of a reassurance of the Cogito; it has no existential value of itself. Recall that the decisive moment of the proof of the Cogito as anything that is not empty, that is, as something rather than nothing, is that the

all-powerful deceiving genius is not God: implicitly, that God exists but does not exist *ipso facto* in the deceiving.[1]

2. What significance can be attributed to the relationship between the Cogito and God, where the Cogito encounters God as the Infinite that must have always existed, at the same time that God's existence begins its life as an object for the Cogito's scepticism? Levinas awakens in this relationship – and it is as much a creative as a salvaging gesture – the 'eminence' that is the idea of God. The eminent fulfils itself through the elision of consciousness, the breakup of *presence* to self. What is invoked in this originary, pre-conscious idea of the Infinite which breaks up thought in its actuality, is a 'passivity' of consciousness that is more passive than can be contained in any signification or history of the present. 'It is then an idea signifying with a signifyingness prior to presence, to all presence, prior to every origin in consciousness and thus an-archical, accessible in its trace' (Levinas 1996a: 137). This is a defensible reading, and it is indeed a deft move to isolate the discriminate and uncontained nature of God – recalling that for Descartes the notion of the Infinite precedes that of the I – and import it with the passivity that awakens consciousness from its assumed bind to being-present-to-self. However, there is a crucial omission, and it may be one that Levinas refuses, rather than fails, to recognise: the strategy works to elide consciousness' grasp on the *idea of infinity* in the Infinite – even as Levinas acknowledges the synthesising and 'encompassing movement' of the Cogito. Let us examine this point in some detail.

3. What is at stake in the fact that Levinas overlooks the reliance of the *idea of infinity* (in the Infinite) to consciousness'

hold, thus enabling him to read in the Third Meditation the beyond-*presence* of Infinity that allows the break up of consciousness? What is precisely elided is the Cartesian theory of Idea as the representation or surrogacy of mind's animate and dynamic property. We might heuristically compare this with Plato's hierarchical framework binding the concepts of Ideas and soul. In Plato, Ideas conjure the noetic, purely intelligible, invisible and absolute reality, the originary knowledge which is always the 'former knowledge' we have of things. Plato's *Phaedo* is especially concerned to demonstrate (beyond the proof of the existence of the soul after death) the character of the universal realm which he understands by the word 'Ideas'. The Ideas belong to the relation of idea and the coming-into-being of idea, or *ousia* and *genesis*,[2] and Plato's dialogue aims to ensure that the distinction maintained in this relation is understood, especially as against the Pythagorean bias for numerical-existential order.[3] The comparison of the Platonic and Cartesian Ideas may be expressed through an observation on linguistic usage: Plato designates the concept of Ideas as the space of *absolute* reality, never *objective* reality. What is termed 'objective' by Plato consists of the existential things ('unintelligible' and 'dissoluble') to which absolute knowledge is applied through human senses. By contrast, the absolute is necessarily ontologically purified of the phenomenal, the non-theoretical, and resides in the atemporality preceding human birth.[4] Socrates argues for the soul's immortality by placing it in the same realm as absolute reality, or Ideas.[5] As with the absolute qualities/essences/standards by which sensible objects are comprehended, the soul exists before human life and reigns over the temporal body. The soul is thus co-existent and co-equal in all other respects with Ideas. The Platonic Ideas can never be derived from the soul, or constitute its expression, that

is, they cannot constitute the objective reality that sits in a relation with the subject (soul/mind); for, by definition, an absolute can have no origin but itself, nor can it be a product or image of another. The absolute sits at the threshold of the circumscription of consciousness, reflecting it as a limit.

The discussion of 'ideas' in the Third Meditation proceeds, superficially at least, to sketch an ontology by which certain ideas, those pertaining to objects which *appear to me* to be outside of me, have their origin from without the mind: 'I experience in myself that these ideas do not depend on my will nor therefore on myself – for they often present themselves to my mind in spite of my will' (Descartes 1980: 160). Descartes conceives of a hierarchy of ideas, including those ideas which are merely 'modes' or 'accidents' of thought and those which represent 'substances', the latter participating in a 'higher degree of being or perfection' than the former. Further, the 'idea again by which I understand a supreme God, eternal, infinite, [immutable], omniscient, omnipotent, and Creator of all things which are outside of Himself, has certainly more objective reality in itself than those ideas by which finite substances are represented' (Descartes 1980: 162). What, then, does it mean to possess objective reality? We know, utilising logic only, that an object can only be the object of a subject; which is to say, that the existence of an object necessarily implicates the existence of a subject circumscribed by the territoriality of the object. Objective reality, then, refers to the *orientation* an object has towards a (its) subject. In this context, 'orientation' may be understood as the adoption of a position of definiteness in a relation; here, the relation of object to subject. The difference that exists as amongst the concepts 'absolute' in Plato and 'objective' in Descartes points to the relative

thematization of immanence and transcendence – this determines the defined position in orientation. For Plato, the immanence of the Idea allows for a distinct space (non-destructible through any conception whatsoever) which is transcendent of the human and all relations set up by the human; the conceptual relation *subject-object* has no role to play in this ontology of Ideas. For Descartes, the objective space is not transcendent of the subject; instead, it is caught up with the subject's transcendentalism, which is also the immanence of the subject in relation to objectivity: 'Objectivity here will assume a certainty of knowledge rather than presuppose a truth recognised as preexisting, or already there' (Deleuze & Guattari 1994: 27). By virtue of the forces that bind ideas to the subject, ideas can never attain a transcendence from the Cogito, that is, to the limit of thought thinking itself; at best, they maintain the quality of eminence, the perpetual ascent or elevation through which they strive for an absolute in spite of, and by virtue of, the Cogito's reign.

The relation *subject-object* which gives rise to ideas constitutes the ground from which Cartesian epistemology is made possible; in Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, the 'prephilosophical' or 'plane of immanence' that contains the intuition that philosophy presupposes. 'In Descartes it is a matter of a subjective understanding implicitly presupposed by the "I think" as first concept; in Plato it is the virtual image of an already-thought that doubles every actual concept' (Deleuze & Guattari 1994: 40). The question of infinite movement arising from the Cartesian plane may be legitimated only within the rubric of a deterritorialisation[6] that severs the territorial connections extant in the concepts or ideas fixing themselves to the intuitive plane. In the *Meditations* the question of infinite movement remains

the experimentalist prerogative of thought, which, by virtue of the legacy of the concept of ideas, refuses to recognise a right that it does not grant. Here, movement is halted, restrained under the immanent-Universal subject reflecting its essence/existence in every thought: 'Transcendence enters as soon as movement of the infinite is stopped' (Deleuze & Guattari 1994: 47).

The idea of God, the Infinite, is known to the Cogito through the *substantialist* notions of immutability, omniscience, omnipotence, etc. And we know, so the proof runs, that the Cogito is not the cause of these notions insofar as (this is merely the skeleton of the proof): A. 'there must at least be as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in its effect;' B. the Cogito, as a finite and imperfect substance, lacking all of the attributes pertaining to God, cannot have as much reality as God; C. for the Cogito to continue to exist, *ipso facto* its cause must be concerned with the Cogito's conservation, nor can this conserving power reside in the Cogito which, as a purely thinking substance, could not fail to be cognisant of the power; D. the conserving force that exists outside the Cogito must at least have as much reality as the Cogito, that is, must possess all the ideas inherent in the Cogito, including, crucially, that of God; E. the conserving cause must be God if it is self-existent – and it must be self-existent since that which perpetually conserves the Cogito cannot have an infinitely regressing origin – by virtue that the possession of self-existence implicates possession of all the perfections of which it has the idea. Remaining at a topographical level of analysis, we observe an overarching presence that moves through this proof. Where Descartes attempts to sever what initially appears as the inevitable unity of apperception and Idea in consciousness, by isolating the 'Infinite-put-in-me'

'contemporaneous with my creation' (Levinas's phrases), there is only the subject making its presence felt through this ambitious rationalisation. If the Infinite is a self-sufficient cause outside the Cogito, all that pertains to the Infinite and its causative and conservative properties nonetheless exist in the necessity or extension of the Cogito's conservation. The Infinite is, by virtue of its own declared teleology, tied *ad infinitum* to the conserving of thought's being, for absent this being the idea of God is impossible. It is as much to say that the Infinite *is* only to the extent that it belongs to the ontological capacity of the *idea of the infinite*, which is the operating principle of the object's relation to the subject: God, in his perfection, is limited to being a perfection thought by me.

When Levinas speaks of the Infinite thinking beyond what it thinks, beyond the intentionality of the subject, he invokes an entire discourse (alterity, Other, *autrui*) of intelligibility with respect to the contradiction embodied in the question, how could the idea of the Infinite be held in a finite thought?[7] The contradiction remains a contradiction, although a sterile one so far as Descartes' epistemological proofs are concerned, as long as the Infinite is entirely represented by the idea of infinity, and for that matter, thinking entirely represented by the possessing of ideas in the Cogito's perpetual reassurance of its existence. In his reading of the Third Meditation Levinas must resign himself to the aporia that the awakening of a consciousness 'which is not awakened enough' merely constitutes the transcendental motions peculiar to and subsumed within subjectivity – the bursts of signification prophetically seeking a threshold to the immanent-subject, or transcendence of the contained Cogito ('thinking which is no longer *aim*, *vision*, *will*, or *intention*' (Levinas 1996b:

157)), and instead finding the condition of its own embryo – the permanence of idea – reified in each movement as the ultimate testimony of *presence*.

III

If we return to the hypothesis with which we commenced, that the law of the *origin* is the singular paradigm that both constructs and unravels the edifice of consciousness, we notice that there is a missing piece: too little has been said of the finite-infinite relation in its metaphysical rather than epistemological functioning. A passage in the Fourth Meditation attempts to deliver a metaphysical picture, locating the Cogito in a definable position relative to the ontological poles, Being and non-being. And again the question of participation is raised: is it possible that there exists an ontic entity that does not rely on my (the Cogito's) participation? The question may now also be put in another way: has consciousness the power to displace the *origin* where the *origin* is instituted by law, thus bound to perennially repeat itself through the government of consciousness in the thinking beyond the 'I' to the Infinite?

> And it is true that when I think only of God [and direct my mind wholly to Him], I discover [in myself] no cause of error, or falsity; yet directly afterwards, when recurring to myself, experience shows me that I am nevertheless subject to an infinitude of errors, as to which, when we come to investigate them more closely, I notice that not only is there a real and positive idea of God or of a Being of supreme perfection present to my mind, but also, so to speak, a certain negative idea of nothing, that is, of that which is infinitely removed from any kind of perfection; and that I am in a sense something

> intermediate between God and nought, i.e. placed in such a manner between the supreme Being and non-being, that there is in truth nothing in me that can lead to error in so far as sovereign Being has formed me; but that, as I in some degree participate likewise in nought or in non-being, ie. in so far as I am not myself the supreme Being, and as I find myself subject to an infinitude of imperfections, I ought not to be astonished if I should fall into error (Descartes 1986: 172-173).

Ricoeur warns us not to conclude from this 'intercalation' that 'man' is an object whose ontological site and morphology are 'fixed by [man's] relation to other realities that are more or less complex, intelligent, and independent than man. Man is not intermediate because he is between angel and animal; he is intermediate within himself, within his *selves*. He is intermediate because he is a mixture, and a mixture because he brings about mediations. His ontological characteristic of being-intermediate consists precisely in that his act of existing is the very act of bringing about mediations between all the modalities and all the levels of reality within him and outside him' (Ricoeur 1986: 2-3). But we must rescue Descartes from this anthropological vision and restore him to the role of supreme metaphysician. The *selves* that Ricoeur refers to are nothing, for Descartes, if not aspects of finitude circumscribed by its relation to the Infinite. The mediations amongst Being and non-being are themselves the forces propelling the transcendental movement of the subject, which always and necessarily functions to restore, conserve and maintain immanence at its core. It will suffice to interrogate two features of this passage in light of what we have discerned from the Third Meditation.

Being and non-being. We can assume on the basis of the care that Descartes takes with respect to terminology and phrasing, that the designation of the non-God (non-perfection, non-infinity) ontological pole with the term 'non-being', that is, lowercase 'b' rather than capitalised 'B', is not arbitrary. The framework is very deliberate, if somewhat obscured by the need to emphasise the epistemological argument on human error. Between Being and non-being is the space of intermediacy: *being*, or finitude. The importance of this space is less where it lies, and on this issue we concur with Ricoeur's argument that the 'intermediate' classification does not correspond to a geographical location but to a function, and more with respect to its *modus operandi*: that it radicalises, and in so doing, ensures the possibility of, the other ontological spaces; both Being (God, perfection, Infinite) and non-being (nothingness, absence) are hermeneutically grounded in being (the thinking I that is susceptible to error, hence finite). This leads directly to the second observation.

Being and non-being are 'ideas' which are 'present to my mind'. The legacy of the proof in the Third Meditation appears with increased luminosity in the decisive expressions utilised in this passage from the Fourth. The 'real and positive idea of God' and the 'certain negative idea of nothing' which are 'present to my mind' remain ideas predisposed to the law of the doubting Cogito. There is no distance from the Cogito, or the distance that is apparent from the conceptualisation of the Infinite is illusory, a representation of the philosophical spirit, nothing more. In his discussion of the First Meditation and Foucault's critique, Derrida situates the 'hyperbolical' moment of the Cogito in the return to an original point no longer belonging to a determined reason or

a determined unreason: 'Whether I am mad or not, *Cogito, sum.*'[8] This origin, Descartes' 'zero point' in the terminology of Derrida or 'immanent plane' in that of Deleuze and Guattari, cannot be reduced to an instance of revelation, a simple, non-divisible primordial entity, the mysterious convocation of a conceptual moment that belongs to itself and no other. What is clearly at stake in the pre-philosophical stage of consciousness is the interpenetration of the *origin* in the metaphysical constructs that follow in the shadows of the transcendental subject, the immanence invoked by the Cogito's perpetual self-reassuring. This interpenetration is what at the outset was denoted by the phrase, *the law of the origin.*

The *origin* cannot be displaced in Cartesian ontology, at least not as easily as Levinas would have us believe (thinking beyond the subject to, and through, the Infinite, where the Infinite is a concept conceptualised in accordance with the subject's transcendence of the objects it individualises in its wake, is riddled with spectral images that make thinking *beyond* thought an impossibility – Derrida summarises this as thought remaining 'within thought'). The presence of the *origin – being*, the thinking substance that mediates all others through the having of ideas – is instituted in the Third Meditation with reprise in each of the other Meditations. Thinking along with Descartes, which is to say through Descartes or beyond him, is a project that inevitably confronts the law of the *origin* at each move.

Notes

1 The crucial passage: 'And certainly, since I have no reason to believe that there is a God who is a deceiver, and as I have not yet satisfied myself that there is a God at all, the reason for doubt which depends on this opinion alone is very slight, and so to speak metaphysical. But in order to be able altogether to remove it, I must inquire whether there *is* a God *as soon as* the occasion presents itself; and if I find that there is a God, I must also inquire whether He may be a deceiver; for without a knowledge of these two truths I do not see that I can ever be certain of anything' (Descartes 1986: 159).

2 See the study of Gadamer (1980) titled 'The Proofs of Immortality in Plato's *Phaedo*'.

3 '*And precisely herein lies the limitation of the Pythagorean explanation of number and world: Pythagoreans take numbers and numerical relationships for existence itself and are unable to think of the noetic order of existence by itself* (Gadamer 1980: 35).

4 'Then if we obtained it before our birth, and possessed it when we were born, we had knowledge, both before and at the moment of birth, not only of equality and relative magnitudes, but of all absolute standards. Our present argument applies no more to equality than it does to absolute beauty, goodness, uprightness, holiness, and, as I maintain, all those characteristics which we designate in our discussion by the term "absolute"' (Plato 1996: 75c-75d).

5 'The soul is most like that which is divine, immortal, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, and ever self-consistent and invariable ... if this is its condition, then it departs to that place which is, like itself, invisible, divine, immortal, and wise, where, on its arrival, happiness awaits it, and release from uncertainty and folly, from fears and uncontrolled desires, and all other human

evils, and where, as they say of the initiates in the Mysteries, it really spends the rest of time with God' (Plato 1996: 80b, 81a).

6 For Deleuze and Guattari the possibility of a deterritorialised plane of immanence resorts to an imanence that is not orientated to the subject, that is not immanent to something other than itself: 'Such a plane is, perhaps, a radical empiricism: it does not present a flux of the lived that is immanent to a subject and individualized in that which belongs to a self. It presents only events, that is, possible worlds as concepts, and other people as expressions of possible worlds or conceptual personae' (1994: 47-8).

7 See Levinas' (1996b) essay, 'Transcendence and Intelligibility', especially the section sub-titled, 'The Idea of the Infinite in Us'.

8 The complete paragraph reads: 'The hyperbolical audacity of the Cartesian Cogito, its mad audacity, which we perhaps no longer perceive as such because, unlike Descartes's contemporary, we are too well assured of ourselves and too well accustomed to the framework of the Cogito, rather than to the critical experience of it – its mad audacity would consist in the return to an original point which no longer belongs to either a *determined* reason or a *determined* unreason, no longer belongs to them as opposition or alternative. Whether I am mad or not, *Cogito, sum*. Madness is therefore, in every sense of the word, only one *case* of thought (*within* thought). It is therefore a question of drawing back toward a point at which all determined contradictions, in the form of given, factual historical structures, can appear, and appear as relative to this zero point at which determined meaning and non-meaning come together in their common origin. From this point of view which here is ours, one could perhaps say the following about this zero point, determined by Descartes as Cogito' (Derrida 1978: 56).

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