The Reversal of Modernity

Philosophy 401

Metaphysics

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The “Reversal of Modernity” explains our present understanding of the world and its resulting loss of ontological understanding and perspective after Rene Descartes. Prior to the events leading up to Descartes’ methodic doubt, the classical mindset understood man’s relation to God, relation to other beings, openness to transcendentals, and their implications for knowledge. Descartes’ search for the foundation of knowledge unintentionally redefined the classical view of knowledge and stripped away much of the previously understood meaning of the world. Descartes left the modern world with a definition of knowledge that is clear, distinct, and certain. Unfortunately, limiting knowledge to what is clear, distinct, and certain also deprived the world of the beauty of transcendentals, metaphysics, and God. This reductionist view of knowledge cutoff man from his fullest potential and ultimately severed the relationship between man and his source, God.

Man naturally searches for purpose and meaning in his life. Asking the question, “Who Am I?”, allows man to begin traveling down the road which will hopefully provide answers those questions. However, man can only begin this journey with humility. No being ever brought itself into existence. As such, man must realize that everything he receives is given to him, as a gift. This reception of the gift on his part necessarily implies a giver. While the giver initially appears to be a mother or a father or another person, man soon learns that these others are dependent and created beings as well. Desiring knowledge of his source leads man to search for the true giver, motivated by a sense of gratitude for the generous gifts he received, namely his life and the world around him. Man, beginning with humility, understanding how much he received, and with gratitude for this reception, ultimately discovers the real giver. This giver to beings and of beings is none other than God himself.

Saint Thomas Aquinas explains the medieval concept of knowledge when he says, “nothing is in the mind that wasn’t first in the senses.”[[1]](#footnote--1) In other words, man finds himself based in experience and the world, immersed in beings, and under the ultimate horizon of *Being* itself. Classical thought understood the dynamism of the intellect to building on sense data. We also know today that sense data is interpreted. Different people can look the same exact stimulus and interpret it entirely differently. People interpret the same stimulus differently because of their differing points of view, differing world experiences, and differing languages. People use different languages to express their understanding of the different worlds they live in.

To help avoid these differing interpretations and to understand what we are really seeing, we must look at the world in context. Stimuli only present themselves fully in the context of the surrounding backdrops. The universal backdrops surrounding the particular stimuli serve to illuminate the meaning of the particular stimulus viewed by a person. Without the universal ideas and perspective provided by the backdrops, one lacks the necessary perspective to understand the particular stimulus he is looking at. To illustrate this point, consider a digitized picture of President Abraham Lincoln. This picture is often shown zoomed in beyond the point where it is recognizable, even as a picture. The lack of perspective prevents us from understanding what we are looking at and the meaning of the zoomed-in digitized squares. But, in light of these universals, as the camera zooms out, we see the one black square we were looking at surrounded by other squares. Eventually, we are able to make out the head, shoulders, and picture frame as they come into view. Finally, we recognize the picture as a person and then as a specific person. But, without the universal ideas of head, shoulders, frame, picture, and so on, we could never recognize what we were looking at. Thus, a proper understanding of universals leads to knowledge. A rejection of the universals leads to a rejection of knowledge. This rejection of the universals is known as nominalism, an idea that greatly contributed to the downfall of classical understanding of knowledge.

Next, we express our understanding of the particulars and universals through language. Human language develops in three stages: expressive, aletheic, and referential. These three stages of linguistic development correspond to the way the world exposes itself to us through sensation, perception, and intuition. At first, we simply express or acknowledge a worldly sensation or stimulus in an almost reflexive manner like a baby grunting or crying. Next, we begin to unveil the meaning of the stimulus partly and begin to understand what is happening. When a child recognizes that a dog is not a person or a car, but begins to perceive the idea of what a dog is, though not fully, we see the aletheic and perception stages of knowledge demonstrated. Finally, we are able to understand that a dog is a dog and to understand the idea of dog fully. At this point, we reach the referential and intuitive stages of language and understanding. Now, through language, we are able to explain our understanding of the world around us. Therefore, human language is more than just noise or sounds. Language relates to reality and our understanding of it. Language is not just a tool. Rather, it forms our understanding and draws us into the world. The world, then, is known to exist. More importantly, the world exists on its own outside of, prior to, and after us. The world is a self-presentation of God revealed to us through the language we are born into. The world emerges from each of these universal backdrops and provides us with the necessary perspectives we need to interpret it through language. Thanks to language and universals, we can actually understand reality.

Before explaining Descartes’ reversal, one last concept must be addressed, the idea of subject and object. The word subject means, to throw under.[[2]](#footnote-0) Its meaning is similar to that of substance, to stand under. In this classical sense, a subject is something that may be pointed to. Similarly an object means, to stand in front of. It comes from the word, to throw. The object is the target of our thought and is internal. The object of our thought, however, is inextricably linked to the subject itself. The object cannot be thought of without the subject. Thus the medieval view of the world saw a necessary relationship between subjects and objects and understood reality as real.

With Descartes’ experiment, man’s understanding of knowledge changed radically. Descartes began a search for the foundation of knowledge. He wanted to demonstrate ideas such as God’s existence with certainty. He derived clear, distinct, and certain knowledge by doubting. The problem with this statement is that he is basing knowledge of knowledge on him and on his understanding of certainty. In his Second Meditation, he explains that through awareness of himself, he knows with clear and distinct certainty that he exists:

I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am*, *I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.[[3]](#footnote-1)

Unfortunately, the reductionist result of Descartes’ method of doubt severed the classical subject-object relationship. Further, Descartes’ method of doubt destroyed the idea of universals, which are inherently external to the thinker, and ultimately metaphysics and the search for God. Now, knowledge resides in the mind of the thinker. More importantly, now knowledge only resides in the mind of the thinker. The world exists in so much as the thinker thinks that it is. God, metaphysics, and the universals are wiped away in the process. How did this happen?

The first step in the reduction of knowledge from its classical understanding comes from Descartes’ definition of knowledge as clear, distinct, and certain. His method of doubt determines what can and cannot be known with certainty using a three-step process. First, Descartes doubts everything. By everything, Descartes means everything including the entire visible world, God, and even his very being. Next, Descartes searches for something indubitable. Third, he decides to base all knowledge on this indubitable foundation by applying the rules of logic.

The next logical step in the deterioration of knowledge resulted in modern science. Mathesis is the process of basing all human thought and understanding on the rules of math and logic. This false notion rejects the classical understanding of knowledge, which never required certainty to begin with, and narrows knowledge in two fundamental ways, epistemologically and ontologically.

Medieval thought understood the epistemological and ontological character of beings, their relationship to other beings, and to God himself. Descartes’ method of doubt strips away the ontological character of being by eliminating God and metaphysics. This epistemological narrowing suggests that we can only know what science can verify. This further narrowing does away with all that cannot be mathesized. Anything that is beyond scientific and mathematical explanation simply cannot be described, much less believed in. The modern view of adding a house to a car to an airplane would give you the answer of three. Instead of having a house, a car, and an airplane, one is left with three objects. What is important to the modern mindset is the number three, not the character, nature, or meaning of the objects. Medieval thought would immediately reject this question on the surface. Aquinas would never reduce the objects to their number or other mathesized qualities. Modern knowledge rejects the manifold and varied sources of knowledge accepted in the classical system and makes math and science king and queen of a new world order.

The final step of the reversal of modernity occurs when objects, previously the target of one’s thought, are now understood to come from one’s mind, exported according to the rules of logic and math and science. The internal object then becomes, based on one’s mind and interpretation, the external reality previously known as the subject. Prior to the reversal, the classical model understood God as the ultimate source from which everything else flowed. He created a world of beings. These beings learn about the world through language. People are drawn into language through its formative nature leading to human understanding. They express their understanding in speech and writing. Human understanding, therefore, is preceded and succeeded by language. Thus, when Descartes wiped away everything with his methodic doubt, he thought he was wiping away language too. However, it is not possible for man to think without language or to express himself without speech and writing. It is also important to emphasize that classical understanding bases everything on God and flows one-way to speech and writing.

But now, the Cartesian flow bases itself on human understanding, disregarding understanding’s necessary foundation in language, and then flowing outward to language. Additionally, Descartes disposed of metaphysics. While he found that God existed, he based everything on man and his ability to think it, an idea directly opposed to our understanding of contingent and necessary beings. As such, while God exists, God exists because man believes in him. Otherwise, he might not exist. Thus the reversal severed the link between subject and object, skewed our understanding of God, metaphysics, and transcendentals, and wiped away the universals and thus our link to classical knowledge itself. While his method of doubt satisfied his desire for clear, distinct, and certain knowledge, the reality is that his reversal left him with nothing.

To prove this point, we know that logic, math, and science provide us with invaluable knowledge about reality. But, they do not provide us with all knowledge. Not every part of reality can be interpreted using this process of mathesis. If you ask a computer to solve complicated math problems, it, following the logic of programming, will quietly and efficiently churn out answers to man’s most difficult mathematical questions. What would have taken hours or even years can now be solved in fractions of a fraction of a fraction of a second. However, ask a computer to tell you how much your mother loves you. The computer simply cannot process this. In fact, for the realm of artificial intelligence, the Turing Test provides a means for investigating whether or not you are engaging in conversation with a person or with a machine. Despite Turing’s predictions, computers fare very poorly against people on this test even today. It is also interesting to note that the means used to determine the identity of the object is none other than language. Computers may possess extensive vocabulary and the rules of grammar for a language, but they lack being. That lack of being is demonstrated in just seconds or minutes using the Turing Test.

Appreciating this leads us to understand the basic flaw of the modern outlook which asks, “What, not who, am I?” Jean Valjean would be extremely disappointed to have sung “What am I? I’m Jean Valjean.” Reversing the reversal ultimately leads us to understand that life, in its full epistemological and ontological dimension, presents itself to us as a mystery. Life is not a problem to be solved. Life contains problems for us to solve, but life, in the proper understanding of the term, remains a mystery.

Today, we prefer to live in the world of theory, not reality. We prefer the ontological and epistemological narrowing that gives us the illusion of complete control. We cling to Newton’s laws of physics and the Cartesian coordinate system that allows us to provide concrete rules to everything that we see. We also identify what is real with what is material. We reduce the world from living language that sees water as water to the narrowed world that only sees H2O.

Ironically, Descartes thought he waived away the world when he said, “I think, I am.” But, he said, “I think, I am.” The fact that he uttered those words shows that he failed to waive away any part of the world at all. In fact, his understanding of anything, including himself, comes from language and his language comes from the world. Language expresses reality. Reality is expressed through language. The meaning of any linguistic expression is found in the language itself. This meaning is demonstrated through our understanding of the universals that are present outside of and in spite of the thinker. Universals aid our understanding of knowledge that exists outside of us, not because of us. Thus, Descartes’ reversal is predicated on himself and what he thinks, which he expresses in language. In the final analysis, Descartes’ reversal is not a reversal, but a misunderstanding. Math, science, and logic make significant contributions to our understanding of the world and reality. However, they do not tell the full story. The reversal of modernity has served to limit man’s progress in understanding the ultimate questions, particularly of metaphysical Being and God. Fortunately, we now understand the error made by Descartes’ methodic doubt and we can now rejoin subject and object and restore the universals, transcendentals, metaphysics, and God to their rightful place.

Bibliography

Descartes, Rene. *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

Metaphysics (Philosophy 401) Class Lecture of Dr. Solis-Silva.

1. Metaphysics Class Lecture. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Metaphysics Class Lecture. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. Rene Descartes. “Second Meditation on First Philosophy.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)