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Resurrecting Descartes Concept of Innate Ideas Through Heideggerian Existentialism

In his Third Meditation, Rene Descartes introduces his classification of different types of thoughts so that he might continue his process of systematic doubt that he begins at the outset of the *Meditations*. In doing so he develops and describes his concept of the innate idea, which he uses to provide evidence for the existence of God and an external world beyond the confines of his own mind. Later philosophers tore apart the concept of innate ideas because other modes of thought, such as empirical evidence and subsequent logical reasoning, are simply better at determining the existence of the real world. It may seem like the concept of the innate idea has been wholly defeated by empiricism, but by looking at the concept through a new lens (namely, through some of the ideas Martin Heidegger expounded in the 20th century) it becomes clear that the innate idea is not so much entirely wrong as it is inappropriately used by Descartes. Descartes introduces into the philosophical lexicon the concept of innate ideas without realizing the full, paradigm-shifting potential of his concept to explain how human beings arrive at an understanding of our relation to Being.

For Descartes thinking predicates being: “so long as I continue to think I am something”¹. From this point, Descartes moves on to classify different types of thought

¹ Forrest E. Baird, ed., *Modern Philosophy*, 6th Ed., Vol. 3, (New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc., 2011), 28.

so that he may “ask which can be bearers of truth and falsity”². The different classifications of thoughts are ideas, volitions, thoughts, and judgments. In classifying ideas, Descartes claims that it seems to him that ideas come from three different sources: they may be innate ideas already inside him, adventitious ideas which arise from judgments of external things, or they may be ideas of his own design and imagination.³ Descartes uses a few different examples to explain, almost simultaneously, both innate and adventitious ideas. First, he uses our mental image of the sun to show that, adventitiously, we view the sun as a very small object, but the idea innate within him of the sun as an object many times larger than the Earth is derived from “astronomical reasoning ... derived from certain notions innate within” him.⁴ His second example is of heat and stone; which must have been implanted within him otherwise he could not reason out what they are when he arrives at them adventitiously.⁵ Finally, he uses his innate idea of God to reason out that God exists. Since man is a finite being but can contain within him the idea of the infinite and based on the principle that things of greater reality cannot be derived from things of lesser reality, Descartes reasons that his innate idea of God must have been planted in him by God himself. Descartes uses his concept of the innate idea to prove that the external world and God exist through the reasoning that his ideas of external things cannot come out of nothing and, since he does have within him ideas about external things, these external things must necessarily exist.

² *Ibid*, 28.

³ *Ibid*, 29.

⁴ *Ibid*, 30.

⁵ *Ibid*, 30

There are quite a few problems with Descartes' usage of his new concept of innate ideas. The ideas exemplified above are much more easily understood through empirical study and reasoning. According to Hobbes, imaginations only come from experience. There are no innate ideas, there are only, as Descartes would term them, adventitious ideas⁶. The external world is much more readily understood and explained through observation and subsequent reasoning; our imaginations only arise after we have experience.

Furthermore, Descartes' innate idea seems to be superfluous because of his usage of adventitious ideas. The two concepts blur together many times in the Third Meditation⁷ to the point that the reader must question the actual use for innate ideas—if there is one at all. The apparent uselessness of innate ideas must lead to at least two conclusions: either they do not exist or they do exist and are inappropriately applied by Descartes to the human person's reasoning faculties. Descartes cannot apply the innate idea to justify external things because it is much more expeditious to explain the existence through adventitious ideas or through empirical observation. Descartes can, of course, counter by saying that innate ideas pave the way for adventitious ideas to be formed. He does this by claiming that innate ideas are "patterns on the basis of which we form all our other conceptions".⁸ The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy also explains that the apparent uselessness of innate ideas in the face of adventitious ideas can be explained by "one interpretation that resolves the above conflict [between innate

⁶ *Ibid*, 61-67.

⁷ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Descartes Theory of Ideas," *Three Kinds of Idea*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes-ideas/> (accessed 3/13/15).

⁸ *Ibid*

and adventitious ideas] casts innate ideas as ideas that underlie all other ideas...”⁹

Even if this is true and innate ideas are a foundation for adventitious ideas to build upon, it may still be true that innate ideas are better equipped to explain Being itself rather than beings in the world.

Enter Martin Heidegger, who once said “Being is the proper and sole theme of philosophy.”¹⁰ According to William Barrett, “Heidegger’s thought is an effort to overcome Descartes,”¹¹ but we can see through Heidegger’s description of Being that Descartes’ concept of the innate idea can be adapted to existentialism and the existential man.

Heidegger’s entire oeuvre is focused upon the question of Being, and why the question itself is important. One of his primary contentions is that there are two ways of conceiving of being: to use the word as a noun and reference beings in the world (man, objects, etc. are all beings in the world); secondary usage of the word being is as a verb which references the action of Being. William Barrett in *Irrational Man* says that, “Heidegger’s contention is that the whole history of western thought has shown an exclusive preoccupation with the first member of these pairs, with the thing-which-is, and let the second, the to-be of what is, fall into oblivion.”¹² Essentially, western philosophy has focused on beings in the world while glossing over what it means to *Be* or upon *Being* itself.

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger,, *Basic Problems in Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 11

¹¹ William Barrett, *Irrational Man* (New York: Anchor Books, 1958), 216

¹² *Ibid*, 212

Heidegger says that there are a few ways in which Being has been explained briefly throughout history; all of which are unsatisfactory to him. Saying that Being is a universal concept, that it is indefinable, or that it is the one self-evident concept does not satisfy the question of Being according to Heidegger. Because the question of Being has been glossed over using these unsatisfactory answers it is, in Heidegger's estimation, important to return to the question "what is Being?"¹³

Barrett says that Heidegger claims three general traits for human beings: mood, understanding, and speech.¹⁴ Germane to our topic at hand is the general trait of understanding. Heidegger's understanding may be understood as the correct application of Descartes' concept of the innate idea: "it is the understanding of Being in which our existence is rooted, and without which we could not make presumptions or theories that can claim to be 'true'."¹⁵ This sounds very similar to the innate idea as a way for the human person's relating to Being or an underlying principle. Tellingly Heidegger says that, "inquiry as a kind of seeking must be guided beforehand by what is sought. So the meaning of being must already be available to us in some way."¹⁶ Descartes' concept of the innate idea must be analogous to Heidegger's understanding, and it can be used as a way—the way—for beings to relate to and understand Being: "understanding always has its mood. If we interpret understanding as a fundamental existentielle, this indicates that this phenomenon is conceived as a basic mode of

¹³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson, 22-24

¹⁴ Barrett, *Irrational Man*, 220

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 221

¹⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 25

Dasein's [literally Being-there's, read Man's] Being."¹⁷

Descartes' concept of the innate idea is the germ of a thought which was not brought to fruition until Martin Heidegger returned to the fundamental question of being and described the general trait of understanding. Descartes came up with a brilliant idea of how human beings think without realizing the implications of it. By trying to apply the innate idea to explanations of the things in the external world rather than the underlying reality of the external world, Descartes relegated innate ideas inert until Heidegger's return to it, expanded and under another name—understanding. The beings in the external world are easily explained through empiricism, but the underlying meaning of Being and Being Itself are more readily described by innate ideas within the human.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 182

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