

Beyond a Metaphysics of Presence: Deconstructing Extra-Systemic Authorities

Dr. Michael Kearney

現前の形而上学を越えて

— Extra-Systemic Authorities の脱構築 —

カーニー マイケル

Introduction

“Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?”

(Heidegger: 2000; 1)

In the book *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Martin Heidegger posits that the above is “the fundamental question of metaphysics.” It is the question of all questions, for it cuts to the core of Dasein: it addresses the concern for determining the primary *grund*, the *ergründen*, the bottom, the origin of all that is. In this paper, the second in the series (see “Fundamental Theories Relevant to Identity Formation” in the *Kogakuin University Journal*, 41-1 for the first in the series), Plato’s account of the creation in *Timaeus*, the Cartesian concept of *cogito ergo sum*, and Heidegger’s discussion of “the most originary question” (Heidegger: 2000; 2), will be considered for the notions on the relationship between the human entity and existence that they expound. The body of work of philosophers dealing with the origin of, or reason for, human existence is enormous; however, these three philosophers have been chosen not only for the immense influence they have had on thought in this area, but also because they represent major streams of thought on the subject of existence and the human in the Classical, Enlightenment, and Modern/Postmodern *epistēmēs* respectively.

A consideration of the works of Plato, Descartes, and Heidegger is essential when discussing identity formation. Plato and Descartes present models of the world and the human that respond to originary questions with a reliance on extra-systemic authorities: here this phrase refers to the grounding centers of meaning, points of *assurance* that would *appear* to operate outside the play of *différance*. *Timaeus* is closely linked with Theology: this work positions God as the *ergründen*,

or transcendental signified, in response to queries of human origin. Descartes' dictum *cogito ergo sum* situates the mind as the center, again a transcendental signified, elevating subjectivity while retaining God as the originary factor. Heidegger's treatise on presence deconstructs these myths, these extra-systemic authorities. This deconstruction removes, without replacing, the previous *ergründen* of Western Philosophical and Theological discourse; leaving the question "Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?" unanswered. The absent answer leaves the human entity hovering, simply "being:" parentless, creatorless, originless, in the void of Dasein.

Plato's *Timaeus*

In *Timaeus*, Plato has the principal character, Timaeus, give an account of the creation of the universe. In this account "a single structure" is applied to all the aspects of the creation. This characteristic of *Timaeus* identifies it as the type of prototypical model for metanarratives that Roland Barthes discussed in his book *S/Z*:

There are said to be certain Buddhists whose ascetic practices enable them to see a whole landscape in a bean. Precisely what the first analysts of narrative were attempting: to see all the world's stories (and there have been ever so many) within a single structure: we shall, they thought, extract from each tale its model, then out of these models we shall make a great narrative structure, which we shall reapply (for verification) to any one narrative (Barthes: 1990; 3).

Plato's *Timaeus*, as a metanarrative, is one of the principal works of Ancient Greece to have influenced the development of Western thought, and its importance as a creation story must be considered. This importance lies in that it is the first Greek portrayal of creation to attempt a systematic account of natural processes on Earth that assumes a purposeful divine creator. Prior to *Timaeus*, Greek works concerning the creation of the world fell within the categories of myth and philosophical speculation. The mythical accounts focused on the Greek gods and sexual reproduction. Philosophical explanations were evolutionary in accounting for the world as having developed from material origins without design: "Greek speculation about the origin of the world had, if mythical, been largely in terms of sexual reproduction or growth, or if philosophical, been evolutionary in the sense that it accounted for the world in terms of undesigned development from material origins" (Lee: 1977; 7).

Timaeus as a composite of these two is a teleological chronicle of divine creation. Throughout the period of the Ancient world it remained an influential work not only with the Neo-Platonists but also with a relatively new group, the Christians. The unnamed "creator-god" of *Timaeus* was easily absorbed into Christian thought, the God of Genesis. A Latin translation of the first fifty-three chapters by Chalcidius survived "into the Dark and early Middle Ages" (Lee: 1977; 7). Considering these two points, Desmond Lee in his *Introduction to Timaeus* argues that "its influence on European thought can be said to be continuous from its publication until the present day" (Lee: 1977; 7). Moreover, in *Timaeus* Plato established "the foundations of the sciences of astronomy, physics, chemistry, and physiology, including the physiology and psychology of perception, ending

with a classification of the diseases of body and soul and provisions for their treatment” (Cooper: 1997; 1224). Plato’s influence on Western philosophical and scientific thought, the early Christians’ assimilation of the creator-god into their religious precepts, and the preservation of the Latin texts ensured *Timaeus*’ influence on the development of Western thought systems: in particular Western notions of the origin of the human entity.

The creator-god of *Timaeus* is an extra-systemic authority, a transcendental signified. According to Jacques Derrida’s concept of the transcendental signified, as he explains it in *Of Grammatology*, it is self-generating, irreducible, and precomprehended (Derrida: 1997a; 18-20). The transcendental signified is self-generating: the “signified ... is not in itself a signifier, a *trace*” (Derrida: 1997a; 18); therefore, it must exist through itself. It produces “itself spontaneously, from within the self” (Derrida: 1997a; 20). It is also irreducible: it defines the meanings of and establishes the relationships of all the elements in the logocentric system for which it is the logos; however, the transcendental signified itself is never identified with any particular signifier. It is present within each signifier, and each originates from it, since it is the signified, but none are present within it, for it has no signified. As the origin, the logos, of the logocentric system, it is precomprehended, for it is the *Primum Cognitum* of the system, the first thought upon which all thought is based.

In *Timaeus* Plato utilizes logic to ground his account of the creation upon a self-generating, irreducible, and precomprehended creator-god. *Timaeus* considers the question of whether the world “has always existed and had no beginning, or whether it has come into existence and started from some beginning” (Plato: 1977; 41). His conclusion is that it has “come into being,” existence. His reasoning is based on the world being “visible, tangible, and corporeal” (Plato: 1977; 41). If it is these he points out, it is, therefore, “sensible.” As a “sensible” thing, *Timaeus* posits that it must be an object “of opinion and sensation,” and as such it is susceptible to change. Since it is susceptible to change, it is something that has “come into being” rather than something that “has always existed” (Plato: 1977; 41). *Timaeus* then closes the point by explaining that if it has “come into being,” it must have done so “owing to some cause” (Plato: 1977; 41). This cause is “the maker and father of this universe” (Plato: 1977; 41), the creator-god. *Timaeus* avoids any discussion of the origin of “the maker” by conceding that “To discover” him “is indeed a hard task” (Plato: 1977; 41) and by quickly returning to what *Timaeus* sees as the central task that must be undertaken in their discussion: “distinguishing between that which always is and ... that which is always becoming but never is” (Plato: 1977; 40).

In *Timaeus* then a precedent is set: originary questions find an end-stop in God: the mystical transcendental signified, the extra-systemic authority. The human entity exists because it was created. Thus, God serves as the *ergründen*, an assurance for the human origin. God is positioned as the final truth, or absolute truth, the point where all *tracing* involved with the comprehension of the human condition must end. The importance of this model of creation in relation to the concept of human identity is that, based upon this model, identity, as an aspect of the logocentric system, is a signifier. Thus, in the quest for the origin of identity, all traces lead back to the core, the transcendental signified, the *ergründen*, God, as the creator of identity.

Descartes' *Cogito Ergo Sum*

René Descartes, like Plato, utilizes deductive reasoning to establish the *ergründen* from which his philosophical investigations stem. Plato deduced that since the universe came “into being,” it must be the result of “some cause:” the creator-god. The universe may be “sensible,” but since it is “visible, tangible, and corporeal,” it does exist; therefore, God must exist, for God is that Being which created the universe. However, *Timaeus* avoids any questioning of the creator-god’s origin by declaring that discovering the creator-god “is indeed a hard task,” for the creator-god, God, is the ideal, the transcendental signified; thus, all trace ends with God as the origin, the core and self-generating creator, of the system: the extra-systemic authority. The difference between the deductive techniques of Plato and Descartes is that Plato bases his argument on the objective world, the “sensible,” while Descartes bases his argument on a subjective premise, *cogito ergo sum*: I think; therefore, I am. “Descartes’ claim to certainty about his thought and existence is central to his general program in epistemology” (Markie: 1992; 140); however, it is a logocentric model that has himself as its transcendental signified. This is problematic, for Descartes does not take into account the epistemological knowledge systems that influenced him to think in the manner that he did.

In *Rule Twelve of Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Descartes declares that “[w]here knowledge of things is concerned, only two factors need to be considered: ourselves, the knowing subjects, and the things which are the objects of knowledge” (Descartes: 1985; 39). While Foucaultian overtones from *The Order of Things* can be identified in Descartes’ declaration, there is a flaw in Descartes’ concern with the “knowledge of things” in the lack of consideration given to the question of how human entities come to be “knowing subjects.” Descartes’ questioning of many of the epistemological notions of his period led to many advances, indeed in *Principles of Philosophy, Part One: The Principles of Human Knowledge* he posits that “[t]he seeker after truth must, once in the course of his life, doubt everything, as far as is possible” (Descartes: 1985; 193); however, the extremely subjective technique which he utilized established God as the *ergründen* from which he operated. Descartes presents thought as an attribute of the human entity without considering that what can be thought is a cultural production, an element of the Symbolic Order that operates in, and is governed by, the language and discursive formations existing within a given *epistēmē*.

In *Part Four* of his *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One’s Reason and Seeking the Truth in the Sciences* Descartes discusses his devoting himself “solely to the search for truth” (Descartes: 1985; 126). In this work, Descartes announces, “the first principle of the philosophy [he] was seeking:”

I resolved to pretend that all the things that had ever entered my mind were no more true than the illusion of my dreams. But immediately I noticed that while I was trying thus to think everything false, it was necessary that I, who was thinking this, was something. And observing that this truth ‘*I am thinking, therefore I exist*’ was so firm and sure that all the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were incapable of shaking it ... (Descartes: 1985; 127).

While the above is similar to Foucault's process of investigation in The Order of Things, it fails to adequately consider from where the process of thought originates and to what and how it is governed. Descartes argues that subjective cognition must have been placed within the human entity since he is capable of "the idea of a being more perfect than" his own. He reasoned that "it was manifestly impossible to get this [idea] from nothing," since it is as impossible for "the more perfect" to "result from the less perfect, and depend on it, than that something should proceed from nothing." His conclusion is "that the idea had been put into" him "by God" (Descartes: 1985; 128). Tracing back with thought as a signifier, leads to the creator of thought, the transcendental signified, God. That the notions of thought and God operate in Descartes' arguments as signifier and signified is evident in the following passage:

'I am, therefore God exists', or 'I understand, therefore I have a mind distinct from my body.' ... we must note that very many necessary propositions, when converted, are contingent. Thus from the fact that I exist I may conclude with certainty that God exists, but from the fact that God exists I cannot legitimately assert that I too exist." (Descartes: 1985; 46)

Descartes deduces the existence of God, the *ergründen*, from a solely subjective position. The existence of God is confirmed with no other evidence than that Descartes thinks. Furthermore, as with Plato, God is the extra-systemic authority. Descartes' definition of God is strikingly similar to Plato's Ideal, the creator-god, and to Derrida's description of the transcendental signified:

... if I had existed alone and independently of every other being, so that I had got from myself what little of the perfect being I participated in, then for the same reason I could have got from myself everything else I knew I lacked, and thus been myself infinite, eternal, immutable, omniscient, omnipotent; in short, I could have had all the perfections which I could observe to be in God. (Descartes: 1985; 128)

While Descartes' questioning of knowledge "truths" is very Foucaultian, he neglects to consider the role of the Symbolic Order in the formation of the identity. This is a major omission from his deductive process, for as Lacan argued (see *Fundamental Theories Relevant to Identity Formation*, *Kogakuin University Journal*, 41-1), subjective identity is an image, a created weave of the Symbolic Order.

Heidegger's "Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?"

Unlike Plato and Descartes, Martin Heidegger does not offer an end-stop, an *ergründen*. His investigations into Dasein offer no assurance but the void. Heidegger explains his mode of analyzing Dasein in the following passage:

The questioning seeks the ground for what is, insofar as it is in beings. To see the ground: this means to get to the bottom <*ergründen*>. What is put into question comes into relation with a ground. But because we are questioning, it remains an

open question whether the ground is a truly grounding, foundation-effecting, originary ground; whether the ground refuses to provide a foundation, and so is an abyss; or whether the ground is neither one nor the other, but merely offer the perhaps necessary illusion of a foundation and is thus an unground. (Heidegger: 2000; 3)

For Heidegger, the questioning cannot end with a transcendental signified, an extra-systemic authority. Like Derrida after him, Heidegger destabilizes the core, which operates as the illusionary foundation of the system. Where Plato stopped because it was “a hard task” to ask the “Why” question of the existence of the *ergründen*, Heidegger pushes forward with the investigation.

Heidegger does this by directly addressing theology, which may be seen as providing the “necessary illusion of a foundation” for those needing better assurance than the abyss when contemplating the originary question:

... anyone for whom the Bible is divine revelation and truth already has the answer to the question “Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?” before it is even asked: beings, with the exception of God Himself, are created by Him. God Himself “is” as the uncreated Creator. One who holds on to such faith as a basis can, perhaps, emulate and participate in the asking of our question in a certain way, but he cannot authentically question without giving himself up as a believer, with all the consequences of this step. (Heidegger: 2000; 7-8)

From this passage it is evident that God has been serving as the ultimate transcendental signified, extra-systemic authority, for Western Culture. However, while Plato’s *Timaeus* “already has the answer,” Heidegger and Derrida question the notion of “the uncreated Creator.” They ask the originary question, why is there an uncreated Creator? They attempt to move beyond the extra-systemic authority, beyond the core of all. A criticism of this questioning of an “established” *grund* is that it is a circular form of questioning: asking the question why of the answer to the question why. However, Heidegger offers the critics a challenge:

The question “Why the Why?” looks externally and at first like a frivolous repetition of the same interrogative, which can go on forever; it looks like an eccentric and empty rumination about insubstantial meanings of words. Certainly, that is how it looks. The only question is whether we are willing to fall victim to the cheap look of things and thus take the whole matter as settled, or whether we are capable of experiencing a provocative happening in this recoil of the why-question back upon itself. (Heidegger: 2000; 6)

Do we “fall victim to this cheap look of things,” for fear of the circular questioning, a questioning that moves us past the illusionary extra-systemic authorities that govern the systems that program, order, control, and limit us, for fear of the circular questioning that leads to the abyss, the void without *ergründen*? Do we need the assurance of the illusion? Without an extra-systemic authority, a creator-god, the only assurance left to stand upon is the questioning itself.

This may appear to be subjective and Cartesian; however, this is not the case, for Heidegger does not place the human entity as the core of *Dasein*. For Heidegger, “observing beings” cannot constitute “Being.” This is because a “building stands” whether we observe it or not: “[w]e can

come across it only because it already *is*" (Heidegger: 2000; 36). As an originary question it must not place "one being" in "the fore:"

... the question should not be about some particular, individual being. Given the unrestricted range of the question, every being counts as much as any other. Some elephant in some jungle in India is in being just as much as some chemical oxidation process on the planet Mars, and whatever else you please. (Heidegger: 2000; 4)

Here Heidegger abolishes the Cartesian subjective deductive reasoning *cogito ergo sum*, for thinking assures us of our existence, but not much else. Based on this reasoning, what *ergründen* is there left, if any, for us to stand upon? Perhaps only the notion that we are part of that which is.

Conclusion

Accepting the above, human identity can then be seen as an amalgamation of myriad systemic influences. In his book Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain, Professor Antonio R. Damasio discusses an integrated model of identity that gives consideration to both the biological and the Symbolic Order. Dualist theories that separate mind and body can no longer be held as reasonable models for notions on the origin and function of identity. Thus, Descartes' assertion that:

... I was a substance whose whole essence or nature is simply to think, and which does not require any place, or depend on any material thing, in order to exist. Accordingly this 'I' – that is, the soul by which I am what I am – is entirely distinct from the body, and indeed is easier to know than the body, and would not fail to be whatever it is, even if the body did not exist. (Descartes: 1985; 127)

can be replaced with Damasio's hypothesis that:

... long before the dawn of humanity, beings were beings. At some point in evolution, an elementary consciousness began. With that elementary consciousness came a simple mind; with greater complexity of mind came the possibility of thinking and, even later, of using language to communicate and organize thinking better. For us then, in the beginning it was being, and only later was it thinking. And for us now, as we come into the world and develop, we still begin with being, and only later do we think. We are, and then we think, and we think only inasmuch as we are, since thinking is indeed caused by the structures and operations of being. (Damasio: 1994; 248)

This passage concurs with Lacan's theory of the Mirror Stage (see *Fundamental Theories Relevant to Identity Formation*, *Kogakuin University Journal*, 41-1). However, there is still the question "Why" this may have occurred, and as with the originary question, it is a question for which there is, as yet, no answer. It is not "the grand question" that Kant attempts to answer in The Critique of Pure Reason ("...what and how much can reason and understanding, apart from experience, cognize?"); however, it is a "grand question" that deserves consideration: "how is the

faculty of thought itself possible” (Kant: 2002; v)? The process by which identity is formed can be addressed, as Lacan has done, and the systems that are in operation and the epistemological formations that are relevant to this process can be investigated, as Derrida and Foucault have done respectively; however, the “Why” this occurs question, an originary question that moves beyond any extra-systemic authorities, is, as yet, beyond us. “Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?” There are, but the “why” is in the void. Why does the human entity have identity? It does, but the “why” is in the void. It is as Kant states in the Preface to the 1781 Edition of The Critique of Pure Reason:

Human reason, in one sphere of its cognition, is called upon to consider questions, which it cannot decline, as they are presented by its own nature, but which it cannot answer, as they transcend every faculty of the mind. (Kant: 2002; i)

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(カーニー マイケル 本学専任講師)