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# Is Res Cogitans Just a Piece of the World? Some Remarks on Husserl's Reading of Descartes

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**Abstract:** Despite Husserl's frequent references to Descartes, their relationship has received limited scholarly attention. This article has two aims: (i) discussing Husserl's interpretation of Descartes' philosophy, especially in relation to the account of the *cogito*, and (ii) using phenomenological insights to reconsider the role of memory in the *Meditationes de prima philosophia*. It argues that Husserl's reading of the *cogito* as a piece of the world is incorrect, yet that his analyses still offer valuable tools for illuminating Cartesian problems. The first section outlines Husserl's method in the history of philosophy. The second shows that, contrary to Husserl, the appearance of the *res cogitans* in *Meditation II* does not pose a new problem but clarifies the initial evidence of the *cogito*. The final section explores the constitutive link between the phenomenological *ego cogito* and history, with particular attention to *Cartesian Meditation IV*.

**Keywords:** descartes; husserl; cogito; Res cogitans; phenomenology

## 1 The Husserlian Method in History of Philosophy

In *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, first published in 1919, T.S. Eliot has two aims: redefining tradition by highlighting history's importance in writing and critically understanding poetry, and advancing an impersonal view of poetry itself. Setting aside this latter task, which recalls some Hegelian motives,<sup>1</sup> I would like to briefly recall and discuss the former. Following Eliot, the poetic works of the past constitute a tradition, yet this tradition is continuously modified by present works, which in turn build a renewed sense of tradition. For this reason, the past is inevitably

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1 On Hegel's History of Philosophy, see Ferrarin (2001, pp. 31–54). Just like Eliot refuses that the poet can be shaped by “private admirations”, Hegel strives to remove all subjective elements from objective philosophy.

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transformed by the present, just as the present is directed and motivated by the past. According to this view, a poet must actively engage with tradition, which cannot simply be inherited but instead demands labor and fatigue. Thus, Eliot insists that historical sense is indispensable for the poet, and this sense entails.

a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order (Eliot 1960, p. 49).

Eliot clarifies that historical sense “is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together”.<sup>2</sup> Keeping Eliot’s view on poetry in mind, the first section of this article discusses the Husserlian way of doing history of philosophy, which, I contend, does not differ much from Eliot’s conception of poetry.<sup>3</sup>

In *Crisis* Supplement XXIV, Husserl identifies the demand for historical consideration [*geschichtlichen Besinnung*] as a distinctive trait of philosophy’s task [*Aufgabe*] to reflect on its present.<sup>4</sup> In fact, “unlike craftsmen, workers, and civil servants, the philosopher’s existence is historical in another and very particular way, which is different from the whole of professions” (Husserl 1959, 488). Philosophers live in their own present, yet in philosophizing they interact with philosophers of the previous generations. In this sense, history is always present within the horizon of the subject who philosophizes and it does not function as a mere “warehouse”, for

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2 Eliot (1960, p. 49).

3 In order to reveal the underlying unity of philosophy throughout history –i.e. the intentional history–, also Husserl develops what he calls the “poetic inventions of History of Philosophy [*Dichtung der Philosophiegeschichte*]” (Husserl 1970, 395). Within Husserl’s poem the attitude [*Einstellung*] that characterizes *Crisis*’ investigations of modernity is primarily theoretical, and the acts of consciousness at play take the form of verification. However, due to the reference to the poem, these acts are also intertwined with other acts that give rise to imagination. Historians likewise rely on “productive fantasy [*produktive Phantasie*]”, but this does not mean that they produce fictions (Husserl 1980, 4), since the poem allows for the highlighting of the teleological unity of modern philosophy in terms of intentional history. On Husserl’s poem of history of philosophy, see also Husserl 1993, 406, and Moran (2012, pp. 145–47). On Husserl’s intentional history, see Klein (1985, pp. 65–84) and Nobili (2024). In addition to Hegelian motives within Husserl’s history of philosophy, Manca (2019, pp. 54–57) highlights that Husserl’s poem is also close to Kant’s critical history of ideas.

4 See Husserl 1959, 487–88. See also Husserl 1993, 227: “In order to understand the present situation of philosophy, we have to historically consider all the modern philosophy, by which our present situation has grown”. Husserl (1969, 9) claims that *Besinnung* “signifies nothing but the attempt actually to produce the sense ‘itself’”. On Husserl’s *Besinnung*, see Dodd (2005, p. 2) and Geniusas (2012, pp. 144–47). Following Nobili (2024) and Sokolowski (1964), it seems to me that only after clarifying its method and its fundamental principles does Husserl relate his phenomenology to the history of philosophy.

“documents themselves, the works of the philosophers or the reports about them as literary facts, are not simply” (Husserl 1970, 392f.), in Heideggerian terms, *Vorhanden*. This is why, in philosophizing, the pastness of the past ceases to exist: “philosophy with its temporal horizon of the past world [...] is present and current [...] insofar it has emerged from its own past” (Husserl 1993, 47). These interactions between past and present create generative connections which represent the “unity of historical development in its broadest sense” (Husserl 1993, 63).<sup>5</sup> For Husserl, this unity of historicity is not merely implied in the present horizon, but it also belongs to the past that the present subject has constituted. Indeed, consciousness understood “as an incessant process of constituting objectivities [...], is a never-ending history”; thus, correlatively, history “in the usual sense of its relation to human culture is only a highest level” of consciousness’ historical dimension (Husserl 2001, 270).

History, therefore, acts on a twofold level: it connects present philosophers not only to their past but also to the entirety of history of philosophy itself. According to this view, in which history is not simply inherited in a passive way, the history [*Geschichte*] of a subject must also be regarded as an “action [*Tathandlung*]” and not as a mere fact [*Tatsache*]. Being a subject for Husserl means having a history, “which means having one’s own development [*Entwicklung*]; being a subject does not simply mean acting, but most deeply it is a progress from action to action, from the product of action in new action to new products” (Husserl 1987, 275). However, if, on the one hand, the past is still present, on the other hand it does not impinge upon the present to the same extent, since each living subject and each age “is moved by its own peculiar driving forces [*Triebkräften*] and is only responsive to what is by and required by its development” (Husserl 1987, 385).<sup>6</sup> For example, Husserl—and this is evident both in *First Philosophy* and *Crisis*—is more responsive to certain philosophies rather than others (i.e., more to Descartes, Hume, and Kant rather than Hegel). It is not by accident that Descartes, Hume, and Kant are treated as partial fore-runners of certain forms of phenomenology. Husserl’s hierarchy among philosophers is clearly informed by their proximity to phenomenological moments. For instance, when discussing Kant’s philosophy in *First Philosophy*, Husserl argues that Kant failed to pursue the Cartesian path, a claim that overlooks the fact that the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Meditations on First Philosophy* are guided by entirely different goals.<sup>7</sup>

5 See also *Crisis* §15. In *Crisis*, the generative dimension of philosophy is both bounded with *zick-zack* method and *Rückfrage* concepts, which I cannot discuss here. On Husserl’s *zick-zack*, see Husserl 1984, 22; *Crisis* §91; Husserl 2002 94, Husserl 2002, 391 and also Derrida (1989); Manca (2016, p. 169f.). On Husserl’s generativity notion, see Steinbock (2017).

6 See also Husserl 1959, 494.

7 See Husserl 2019, 436-37. As is the case for Kant, Luft (2011, p. 185f.) highlights that also for Husserl it is possible to understand “the author better than he understood himself” (Kant 1998, A 314, B 370). The

Husserl's historical investigations are therefore not a historiographical inquiry, but a backwards reflection [*Rückbesinnung*] on modernity aimed at reactivating concepts that have sedimented in modern philosophy and uncover "the teleology in the historical becoming of philosophy, especially modern philosophy" (Husserl 1970, 70). This mode of clarifying history consists in inquiring into the primal establishment of the goals that link generations together, insofar as these goals persist in sedimented forms that can be reawakened again and again. At the level of history, every era possesses horizons of open problems, unresolved issues, and underlying assumptions. Those who philosophize in the present leave open-ended intentions and predelineations of meaning, which will be fulfilled (or modalized) in the future. Similarly to how the *Urimpressionen* confirm or negate the validity of an intentional content, philosophers of the present assess and reinterpret past philosophies. In relation to the present topic, according to Husserl, Descartes' realization of the *cogito* is the intention that finds its fulfillment in transcendental phenomenology. This implies that the primal establishment [*Urstiftung*] of the transcendental subjectivity finds its final establishment [*Endstiftung*] within Husserlian phenomenology. With the lexicon of the *Cartesian Meditations*, Descartes' *Meditationes de prima philosophia* address the themes of subjectivity and objectivity of knowledge within the framework of the natural attitude, so that the analysis remains confined to the immanence of intentionality (not yet reduced). In contrast, Husserl's phenomenology aims to make the Cartesian intention truly radical by tracing all types of constitutions of meaning back to transcendental subjectivity. This implies that Descartes' philosophy cannot be passively inherited; its errors must be corrected. As Husserl already claimed in *Philosophy as a Rigorous Science*, the *Wissenschaftstrieb* cannot make philosophy a *strenge Wissenschaft*, since such transformation [*Umwendung*] requires a "decision for this new foundation [*Intention auf eine Neuebegründung*] (Husserl 1987, 7)". The same can be said in the context of the history of philosophy, since, as Steinbock highlights, "*telos* is neither given in advance nor fulfilled by a

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aim of this article is not to discuss Husserl's reading of Kant. Yet, as many scholars remark, it is important to keep in mind that Husserl deals mostly with the *Prolegomena* rather than the *Critique of Pure Reason*. On this topic, see especially Ferrarin (2015a, pp. 63–92). Against the tendency to read Kant's reason as a response to Hume, see also Ferrarin (2015b, pp. 30–34; 172–76). In light of this, claiming with Husserl that "the eighteenth century and the age that followed were so strongly actuated by empiricism (or better, by anti-Platonism) that nothing was remoter from them than recognition of ideal formations as being objectivities" (Husserl 1969, 258f.) is with no doubt problematic. Indeed, keeping in mind Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, if on the one hand, Kant has no ideal formations (in Husserl's words), on the other hand, the immanent use of ideas discussed into the *Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic* of *Critique of Pure Reason* disproves Husserl's statements on Kant's "anti-Platonism". On the immanent use of Ideas of the pure reason, see Ferrarin (2015b); Guyer (2000, pp. 60–94); La Rocca (2011, pp. 29–45); Rauscher (2010, pp. 290–309).

blind drive”; thus, philosophy “only functions teleologically if it becomes a teleology, that is, if we *make* it a teleology by reawakening it through active participation”.<sup>8</sup>

Husserl is interested in showing how Descartes’ philosophy can be re-activated and productive for the present, despite his person is “dropped into absolute slumber” (Husserl 1973c, 609). By keeping in mind the notions of horizon and generativity, we can understand both what Husserl claims here and why *Crisis* presents an alternative approach to reduction – one that begins with the life-world and is inseparable from the historical dimension.<sup>9</sup> The Cartesian way to reduction is partly criticized by Husserl in his late phenomenology because, while it goes to the transcendental ego “in one leap [...] it brings this ego into view as apparently empty of content” (Husserl 1970, 155, italics mine). In contrast, the ontological way allows the access to phenomenological reduction starting from the life-world and its historical dimension. But “since all knowledge [*Erkenntnisse*] is situation-dependent traditionally founded” (Husserl 1993, 385), it seems more convincing to discuss Husserl’s critique of Descartes in its historical nexus, as Husserl himself has done since the ‘20s. According to Husserl’s approach to the history of philosophy, philosophers are not merely considered as individuals who lived in a certain historical period, but rather as subjects that constituted the concepts through which they themselves and present philosophers think. The Husserlian approach to the history of philosophy could legitimately be challenged for its limited engagement with historiographical sources and for offering a one-sided reading of past philosophers. This is particularly evident in relation to Descartes’ masterpiece, in which Husserl focuses almost exclusively on the first two *Meditations*. Additionally, in recalling the philosophies of the past, Husserl turns them into moments that converge towards phenomenology itself.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, as confirmed in the *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl is not concerned with how Descartes presents his concepts, but rather with their relevance to the framework of transcendental phenomenology and to the possibility of overcoming the crisis which is *prima facie* a philosophical one.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, from the very introduction to the text, Husserl emphasizes the importance of “reject [ing] nearly all the

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8 Steinbock (2017, p. 50). The way the *telos* operates in history resembles its mode of functioning on the level of perception. On the *telos* within Husserl’s perception, see Summa (2014, pp. 224–33).

9 On the ontological reduction, Kern (1962, pp. 303–49); Lohmar (2013, pp. 1–20); Miettinen (2014, p. 278ff). On horizon, see Geniusas (2012).

10 This implies a Husserlian thesis that I cannot address in detail here: the idea that there is only one kind of philosophy. On the genuine idea of philosophy see Cartesian Meditations §§1–3; *Krisis*, Supplement XXVIII; Husserl 1993, 406 and also Majolino (2023, pp. 21–61).

11 The sense of crisis highlighted in *Crisis* echoes the opening of the *Cartesian Meditations*, in which Husserl complains that “philosophers meet, but [...] not the philosophies” (Husserl 1960, 5). See Trizio (2016, 2022) for a discussion of the meaning of the Husserlian “crisis”.

well-known doctrinal content of Cartesian philosophy (Husserl 1960, 1)” and retaining only what is relevant for our present.

## 2 Husserl’s Critique of Descartes and the Cartesian Answer

### 2.1 Husserl’s Critique of Descartes

A survey of Husserl’s references to Descartes suggests two recurring features. The first one, strictly methodological, is the tendency to reduce the *Meditationes de prima philosophia* to its first two days, as highlighted in the manuscript *Kritisches zu Descartes’ Meditationen* (B I 36 II).<sup>12</sup> The second is the static nature of Husserl’s judgment of Descartes, which presents little variation from the two volumes of *First Philosophy to Crisis*. Indeed, since *The Idea of Phenomenology*, Husserl draws on Descartes’ distinction between immanence and transcendence to clarify two points: on the one hand, the apodicticity—and here also the absoluteness—of the *cogito*, and on the other hand, the function of reduction in accessing other types of evidence. Let me clarify the first point by recalling an example: a sensible object appears to us only in its adumbrations – such as for instance, the apple which is given through glimpses – and, “correlatively, it is inherent in the sense of its intentional object [...] to be essentially perceivable only by [...] adumbrative perceptions” (Husserl 1983, 94).<sup>13</sup> The same, however, does not apply to the *ego cogito*. Indeed, and moving to the second point, from the very first exposition of transcendental phenomenology in *The Idea of Phenomenology*, Husserl claims that an “epistemological reduction” is necessary to distinguish the *cogitatio* from the psychological evidence of my *cogitatio* (Husserl 1950, 43). Husserl understands the Cartesian *cogito* as adequate evidence, which becomes absolute only after the phenomenological reduction. Thus, Husserl acknowledges that Descartes’ *cogito* has no doubt, since it “is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind” (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 17; AT VII 25). At the same time, Husserl criticizes the Cartesian *res cogitans* for its psychological path.

Although Descartes’ *cogito* is an inadequate principle from a transcendental point of view, Husserl’s focus on Descartes’ *Meditations* is not limited to the *cogito* as evidence but also considers its relevance in historical terms. Starting from *First*

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<sup>12</sup> Note that at the end of *Meditationes’ Preface* (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 8; AT VII 10), Descartes himself asks to his readers to judge his work by keeping in mind also all objections and replies.

<sup>13</sup> Husserl 1983. See also Husserl 1989, 185.

*Philosophy*, Husserl claims that modernity begins with Descartes, and the same claim is repeated both in *Cartesian Meditation* and *Crisis*.<sup>14</sup> Thus, for Husserl, Descartes'

*Meditationes de prima philosophia* represent a completely new beginning in the history of philosophy in their attempt to discover, with a radicalism unheard of up to then, the absolutely necessary beginning of philosophy, while deriving this beginning from absolute and entirely pure self-knowledge. From these noteworthy "Meditations on First Philosophy" stems the tendency, found throughout the whole modern period, of recasting all philosophy as transcendental philosophy. This tendency indicates a basic character not only of modern philosophy, however, but also, as can no longer be doubted, of all scientific philosophy as such, now and for all time (Husserl 2019, 8).

Since Husserl speaks of the underlying tendency that drives the entire modern period, he also outlines the idea of a teleological philosophy. Yet, while recalling the Cartesian *Umsturz*—"the *universal overthrow* of all previous convictions" (Husserl 2019, 226, italics in the text)—Husserl also emphasizes Descartes' failure to fully engage with transcendental philosophy. The ambiguity of Husserl's assessment of Descartes becomes particularly evident in the comparison that he draws between Descartes' philosophical role and the figure of Columbus.<sup>15</sup> In the same way that Columbus discovered America while thinking he had reached the Indies, Descartes discovered transcendental subjectivity yet misled its meaning by using the first evidence of the *cogito* to ground the objective sciences. From this juxtaposition, it is possible to gather that Husserl's assessment of Descartes is ambiguous for two reasons: (i) Husserl recognizes the French philosopher as the father of modernity, but he also considers him the principal source of the philosophical errors stemming from objectivism; (ii) in Husserl's view, Descartes overlays the naturalistic concept of the soul on the pure domain of the transcendental egological *cogitatio*. Thus, the *ego cogito* is a "piece of the world" (Husserl 1960, 25),<sup>16</sup> and therefore the *Meditationes de prima philosophia* are a "piece of psychology" (Husserl 1970, 82). This evaluation recalls the one that can be read both in *Cartesian Meditations* and in *Crisis*, in which Husserl states that "the ego is not a residuum of the world but is that which is absolutely apodictically posited; and this is made possible only through the epoché, only through the "bracketing" of the *total world-validity*" (Husserl 1970, 79). Indeed, by contrasting the *cogito* that comes out from doubt with the apodicticity of phenomenological subjectivity, Husserl contrasts the natural domain of the *Meditationes de prima philosophia* with the realm of transcendental phenomenology,

<sup>14</sup> Husserl 2019, 63. See also Husserl 1970, 74. On Descartes' fatherhood of Modernity, see Schütt (1998, pp. 143–81). On Husserl's reading of Descartes, see Barbaras (2018); De Warren (2015); De Warren (2018); MacDonald (2000); Mehl (2020).

<sup>15</sup> See Husserl 2019, 66.

<sup>16</sup> See also Husserl 2019, 77; Husserl 1970, 79.

accessible through epoché and reduction. Following Husserl's analysis, Descartes' situation is thus paradoxical for while he "stands on the threshold of the greatest of all discoveries – in a certain manner, has already made it", at the same time he "does not grasp its proper sense" (Husserl 1960, 24–25), i.e., he does not grasp the sense of transcendental subjectivity.

As can be seen, these references to Descartes consistently serve to clarify issues internal to Husserl's own thought. The French philosopher allows Husserl to distance himself from certain philosophical assumptions that obstruct proper access to the transcendental domain. Consequently, the realization of a transcendental phenomenology necessarily involves a critique of Descartes' philosophy. In light of this, Husserl recognizes a certain debt to Descartes: through his *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, Descartes lays the groundwork for the development of transcendental philosophy. At the same time, the errors present in the *Meditations* serve as warnings for phenomenology, highlighting misunderstandings that could hinder both access to and sustained engagement with the domain of transcendental subjectivity.

## 2.2 *Res* What? Some Remarks on Descartes' *Meditation II*

As stated in *Crisis*, the teleological consideration of history cannot be refuted by a detailed analysis of the texts.<sup>17</sup> For this reason, I intend, on the one hand, to focus the discussion of Descartes' *Meditations* only to the specific passages criticized by Husserl and, on the other hand, to enrich the Husserlian reading of the *cogito* assuming the Cartesian standpoint, notably with regard to the proper meaning of *res* in *Meditation II*. Husserl's target, in his reading of Descartes' *Meditations*, is the account of the *cogito* presented in *Meditation II*. More precisely, Husserl's criticism is directed against the passage in which Descartes asserts "I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing that thinks; that is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason [*res cogitans, id est, mens, sive animus, sive intellectus, sive ratio*]" (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 19; AT VII 27). The reason for this lies in the fact that, for Husserl, two conflicting instances coexist in Descartes' *Meditations*: transcendental philosophy (albeit only as a *Keim*<sup>18</sup>), exemplified by the *cogito*, and a kind of objectivism from which positivism derives that coincides with the application of the first evidence to mathematics.

Starting from a Cartesian standpoint, I intend to argue that, despite Descartes' ambiguities on the notion of 'soul', Husserl's reading of *cogito* as a piece of the world

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<sup>17</sup> See Husserl 1970, 73.

<sup>18</sup> On Husserl's use of *Keim* (seed), see Husserl 2019 154; 208; Husserl 1959, 436. The reference to the *Keim* must be regarded as a metaphor. In Husserl 1993, 397–98, Husserl denies the possibility of comparing the history of philosophy to a flourishing organism.

is incorrect. Nevertheless, Husserl's interpretation is philosophically productive, as it brings to light a central issue in the *Meditations*: the role of memory, which I will discuss below. In particular, I aim (i) to clarify the role of mind's *intelligere* in *Meditation II*—a mode of *cogitatio*—and (ii) to demonstrate that the passage in which the *res cogitans* appears for the first time does not pose a new problem within the *Meditations*, but rather clarifies the meaning of the first evidence of the *cogito*.<sup>19</sup> First, I would like to recall the ambiguities surrounding the term soul [*anima*] acknowledged by Descartes himself. A passage in *Replies II* clarifies that it is preferable to use “the term ‘mind’ rather than ‘soul’ since the word ‘soul’ is ambiguous and it is often applied to something corporeal” (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 114; AT VII 161). More precisely, unlike those who use soul to refer both to functions such as nourishment and growth and to thinking, Descartes insists that these principles are fundamentally different in kind. Indeed, soul “must be understood to apply only to the principle in virtue of which we think”, thus the mind, and this latter must be considered “not as a part of the soul but as the thinking soul in its entirety” (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 246; AT VII 356). Setting aside Descartes' critique of *De Anima II 2*, here it is important to notice that ‘soul’ functions as the principle of thinking.<sup>20</sup> Thus, for Descartes, the mind is not the *entelecheia* of a body, but rather the activity of thinking, distinct from all other activities of the soul, such as growing and nourishing. With the ambiguity in mind, let us now move on to the analysis of the *Second Meditation*.

After recalling the steps of doubting, in *Meditation II* Descartes concludes that he must be something, at the very least, if he has persuaded himself of anything [*Imo certe ego eram, si quid mihi persuasi*], from which he derives the foundational statement “*ego sum, ego existo*” (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 17; AT VII 25). At this point, the question of who [*quisnam*] this I actually is remains unresolved and Descartes proceeds to examine everything he previously believed himself to be. Here, it is important to notice that an examination like this one would be impossible without memory, but let us proceed in order. Descartes asks, “what [*quidnam*] then did I formerly think I was?” and then he answers that he was a man, which means “animal rationale” (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 17; AT VII 25).<sup>21</sup> Since the doubt and the deception of

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19 On the role of *intelligere* and *res cogitans* in *Meditation II*, see Agostini (2018, 2022, 2024). Against the identification between *res cogitans* and substance, see also Barbaras (2018); Marion (2009); Merleau-Ponty (2022).

20 Interestingly, Hegel relies on Aristotle's philosophy to criticize the reduction of thinking to the subjective and conscious sphere. On the contrary, for Descartes thinking is no longer the activity of Aristotelian *nous*, but the activity of the ‘soul’ as a whole. On Hegel's reading of Aristotle, see Ferrarini (2001).

21 The difference between *quisnam* and *quidnam* is overlooked in the English translation, since editors use “what” in both cases. I stress the importance of the Latin here in order to highlight Descartes' ambiguities in outlining the *cogito*.

the malicious deceiver are still present, Descartes needs to clarify what both ‘animal’ and ‘rational’ mean. After highlighting the problems that derive from the Scholastic definition of ‘man’, Descartes examines what “comes into [...] thoughts spontaneously and quite naturally” (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 17; AT VII 26), that is, the corpses and activities referred to the soul—e.g. having a face, hands, arms but also nourishing, moving, sense-perceiving and thinking. However, the nature of the soul is still unknown, and it can just be imagined as a “something tenuous, as wind, or fire, or ether” (Descartes 1985, vol. II; 17; AT VII 26). According to the setting of *Meditation II*, all references to knowledge of bodies are suspended, including those derived through imagination. The same applies to the activities of the soul, such as nourishing. Thus, Descartes asserts: “Thinking! At least I have discovered it – thought: this alone is inseparable from me” (Descartes 1985, vol. II; 18; AT VII 27). Indeed, since it is impossible to admit “anything except what is necessarily true”, the I is, “in the strict sense, only a thing that thinks [*res cogitans*]; that is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason [*res cogitans, id est, mens, sive animus, sive intellectus, sive ratio*]” (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 18; AT VII 27). Correlatively, only thinking cannot be separated from the I.

In these passages, Descartes argues that the soul properly understood is just thinking, that is, the act of thinking. However, he faces the question of what the I can imagine of itself—a path that is ultimately barred because imagination relates to bodies, which are still suspended by doubt. It is also important to keep in mind that this abstraction from bodies does not establish the real distinction between mind and body, a question Descartes will address in *Meditation VI*.<sup>22</sup> In *Meditation II* Descartes cannot consider the I’s body but he does not exclude the possibility that the I is bodily in an absolute sense; rather, he simply excludes the bodies from the evident knowledge of the I and “this is quite sufficient to enable me to assert that I, insofar as I know myself, am nothing other than a thinking thing” (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 145; AT VII 355). Indeed, in *Meditation II*, only judgments grounded in what is known through understanding are permitted, and, accordingly, nothing can be accepted except what is necessarily true. This is the golden rule which demands to “care not to admit anything as true when we cannot prove it to be so” (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 245; AT VII 355). Thus, at least thought, *cogitation*, “is inseparable from me” (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 18; AT VII 27) and does not refer to things in the world. For this reason, the I is a *res cogitans*—that is, something that “doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions” (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 19;

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<sup>22</sup> See *Replies III* (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 123; AT VII 175): “It may be”, he says, “that the thing that thinks is something corporeal. The contrary is assumed, not proved”. But I certainly did not assume the contrary, nor did I use it as the ‘basis’ of my argument. I left it quite undecided until the Sixth Meditation, where it is proved”.

AT VII 28)<sup>23</sup>—but it is not a piece of the world, pace Husserl. All these activities of the soul must be regarded only in their noetic aspect, since all references to objectivity are vulnerable to the falsification of doubt. This is also why, on the one hand, imagination is included in the definition of the *res cogitans*, but on the other, unlike understanding (*intelligere*), it cannot grasp what is necessarily true.

Descartes achieves *res cogitans* definition by relying on the evidence of the *cogito* and following the golden rule, which recommends to take into account only what is necessary true. For this reason, only thought is inseparable from the I. Nonetheless the problem of the ambiguity of the use of ‘*res*’ in the *Meditations* remains and the scenario becomes more complicated due to the self-evidence of this notion mentioned in *Meditation III*.<sup>24</sup> As Agostini argues, the reason for the polysemy of this term (*res*) lies in the hierarchical conception of reality of the *Meditations*, which lead *res* to cover a semantic spectrum that goes from the existence of an idea in the mind to the substance to which its attributes refer.<sup>25</sup> Both occurrences of *res cogitans* in *Meditation II* confirm beyond doubt that the I is a thinking existence and the essence of the *res cogitans* is the *cogitatio* itself. This is possible because, unlike in the *Principles*, the conceptual distinction between substance and principal attribute is not yet fully developed in the *Meditations*.<sup>26</sup> When we read ‘*res cogitans*’ in *Meditation II*, we must keep in mind that ‘*res*’ indicates the activity of thinking rather than a substance. At this point of the analysis, what is certain is that the I is a *res cogitans* and this is the result of the role of *intelligere*, which admits only what is certain. Thanks to these developments, Descartes is now capable of “beginning to have a rather better understanding of *who [quisnam] I am*” (Descartes 1985, vol. II 20; AT VII 29, Italics mine), which is nothing more than a *res cogitans* aware of it thinking activity. It must be noted that the resolution of doubt occurs through thought itself, as the *cogito* encompasses thinking and demonstrates its validity through the act of *intelligere*. For all these reasons, the passage in which the *res cogitans* first appears

<sup>23</sup> See also *Replies II* (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 113; AT VII 160).

<sup>24</sup> In *Meditation III* (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 26; AT VII 38), Descartes clarifies: “my understanding of what a thing is, what truth is, and what thought is, seems to derive simply from my own nature”. On this topic, see also *Replies VI* (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 192; AT VIII 426).

<sup>25</sup> See Agostini (2018, 157ff), who discusses the following passage of *Reply III* (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 130; AT VII 185): “[...] reality admits of more and less. A substance is more of a thing than a mode; if there are real qualities or incomplete substance, they are things to a greater extent than modes, but to a lesser extent than complete substances; and, finally, if there is an infinite and independent substance, it is more a thing than a finite and dependent substance». Another terminological ambiguity regards also ‘*cogitatio*’, since ‘thought’ is sometimes taken to refer to the act; sometimes to the faculty; and sometimes to the thing which possess the faculty”.

<sup>26</sup> See esp. *Principles I*, LXII (Descartes 1985, vol. I, 214; AT VIII 30).

does not introduce a new problem within the *Meditations*, but rather clarifies the meaning of the initial evidence.

In *Meditation II*, thus, Descartes (i) is certain of his existence; (ii) discovers that the essence of the I is thinking and that the I cannot be detached from this activity; (iii) knows that I is *res cogitans* (= thinking existence) and that all modes in which the cogitation works are constitutive of this kind of *res*; (iv) understands *res cogitans*' nature by the *intelligere* – i.e., a mode of the *cogitation*; and finally claims that (v) all inferences on the (un)embodiment of the I cannot be proved until *Meditation VI*. The latter point is proved also by the example of the piece of wax. Before introducing this example Descartes writes.

From all this I am beginning to have a rather better understanding of what I am. But it still appears – and I cannot stop thinking this – that the corporeal things of which images are formed in my thought, and which the senses investigate, are known with much more distinctness than this puzzling 'I' [*istud nescio quid mei*] which cannot be pictured in the imagination (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 20; AT VII 29).

This reference to the I (which has been defined as a *res cogitans*) does not yet appear to be a fully developed positive principle. Note that Descartes introduces “substance” for the first time in *Meditation III*, claiming “I am a substance” (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 30; AT VII 44–45).<sup>27</sup> He also states that he used “the most abstract terms [...] in order to refer to the thing or substance in question”, since he “wanted to strip away from it everything that did not belong to it” (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 123; AT VII 174). Thus, in the *Meditations*, “*cogitatio*” is the abstract term that designates the “*res cogitans*”, even though, in practice, it does not allow for a proper distinction between these two elements. Given that the term *substance* appears for the first time in *Meditation III*, specifically to emphasize the contrast between the finitude of the ego and the infinity of God, it is not necessary to clarify the first principle again, as it has already been established in *Meditation II*.<sup>28</sup>

Before concluding this section, I would like to stress that Husserl's critique of the *cogito* resembles Hobbes' in that both emphasize the material dimension of the first

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<sup>27</sup> See also *Replies III* (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 109; AT VII 153). On substance notion, see also *Replies II* (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 114; AT VII 161); *Replies III* where Descartes addresses and describes the *res cogitans* using “more abstract terms” (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 123; AT VII 174), which are opposed, for instance, to concepts like *subjectum*, *materia* and *sustantia*. On Descartes' use of the “most abstract terms” referring to *res cogitans*, see Agostini (2022).

<sup>28</sup> See also Marion (2021, pp. 60–68) and Carraud (2021, p. 299), who state that *res* is “insignificant” for the understanding of the *cogitatio*. On the contrary, Agostini (2018, pp. 145–73) argues that *res cogitans*' mode of being is properly a *res vera*, a concept thematized in *Meditation V* but operative also in *Meditation II*.

principle, based on a specific understanding of *res*.<sup>29</sup> However, both Hobbes and Husserl reverse the argumentative order of *Meditations* and attribute primacy to *res cogitans* rather than to the activity of thinking. In light of this, Merleau-Ponty seems correct in asserting that “*Res cogitans* is not a substantialist construction but a way of saying that this openness to something is not a zero of being”; rather, a “presentation of someone to me and hence from myself to myself, suffices to constitute an entirely new type of being”.<sup>30</sup> Insofar as the *cogito* of *Meditation II* is the reverse of doubt—and that constitutes its evidence—the *res* is not entirely positive, as the term *substantia* might suggest. Nevertheless, because it is defined in opposition to doubt, the *cogito* cannot be regarded as a wholly positive principle, despite the conventional connotations of *substantia*.

### 3 A Husserlian Answer to a Cartesian Problem

Descartes’ first evidence involves a two-terms relationship between the *ego sum* and the *ego existo*. In contrast, for the Phenomenological Ego, the terms are three: *ego-cogito-cogitatum*. While the *cogito-cogitatum* nexus can be addressed in terms of flow, the Ego can be addressed from different points of view. In what follows, I narrow down the discussion to the Ego of genetic analysis presented by Husserl in the *Cartesian Meditations*. In *Cartesian Meditations* §30, Husserl states that Ego is what it is solely in relation to intentional objectivities.<sup>31</sup> What characterizes the Ego is the possibility of recognizing systems of intentionality. Indeed, each Ego has systems of intentionality as its correlates, which may exist either in its immanent time or as potential intentions that can later be fulfilled. After making this claim, in *Cartesian Meditation* §§31–33, Husserl points out a kind of *Stufenleiter* of the Ego, in which the Ego is presented successively as an identical pole (§31), a substrate of habitualities (§32) and, finally, a monad (§33).<sup>32</sup> In §31, a judgment is directed toward a *So-sein* state of affairs and the Ego is still the same who is thus and so decided also after the flowing of *cogitationes*. Within the framework of genetic phenomenology, in §32 Husserl shows how an act can be retained and remembered by the Ego, who can return to it repeatedly as a habitual conviction, as long as the Ego is convinced of that *So-sein*.

<sup>29</sup> I take this suggestion from Barale (2008), p. 239fn. On Hobbes-Descartes *Objections* and *Replies*, see Agostini (2022, p. 106ff.); Garber (2013).

<sup>30</sup> Merleau-Ponty (2022, p. 153); on this interpretation of Descartes, see also Barbaras (2018, p. 22ff).

<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, Husserl 1960, 65.

<sup>32</sup> In summarizing *Cartesia Meditation IV*, I follow De Santis (2023, pp. 113–39). On Husserl’s habituality and habitus, see Moran (2011). Regarding the topic presented here, it is important to keep in mind that habits are involved “from the level of experience, through the formation of the ego, to the development of society” (Moran 2011, 53).

Indeed, the Ego “is not an empty pole but is the bearer of its habituality, and that implies that it has its individual history” (Husserl 1989, 313). The Ego can refer to itself as the same Ego that maintains this conviction; then, in §33 the monad is presented as the higher level of concreteness which has its *Umwelt* as a correlate; “*Moi comme pôle identique, plus: mes habitus, plus: mon monde*” notes Ricoeur.<sup>33</sup> The characterization of the pure Ego as a pole from which intentionality radiates, outlined in *Ideas I* (§80), is not subsequently abandoned but integrated into his later thought. This, in turn, justifies the conception of the monad as a “living unity which carries within itself an Ego as a pole of action and receptivity [*Ich als Pol des Wirkens und Leidens*], and a unity of life both awake and hidden [*verborgen*] – a unity of faculties, of dispositions, and of that which is concealed or unconscious” (Husserl 1973b, 34).

Since the activity of the Ego consists in “posing and explicating being”, which means setting up “a habituality of the Ego” (Husserl 1960, 68), the World must be regarded as the domain “in which we are always already leaving and which furnishes the ground for all cognitive performance and all scientific determination” (Husserl 1979a, 41). Here, it is useful to recall the second part of *First Philosophy*, where Husserl (i) contrasts the apodictic Ego with the evidence of the World, and (ii) then remarks that this distinction is analytic, since the concordance of the World is evidence in favor of its permanence. It is quite relevant to notice that in *Cartesian Meditation IV* Husserl addresses the personal Ego – my monad – and not a monad in general. Thus, the World here is “*für-mich-seinende Umwelt*” (Husserl 1960, 68), i.e., the correlate of my personal character within my history, as we read also in *Ideas II* §50. What characterizes the Ego is therefore the coincidence between the absolute concretum (the monad) and the individuum.<sup>34</sup> Leaving the transcendental idealism of *Cartesian Meditation IV* and the Ego’s self-variation of §34 aside,<sup>35</sup> it is important to keep in mind that the Ego in its concreteness always has its own history. Therefore, genetic analysis points out that memory re-presentations contribute to the constitution of my habits. Already within passivity, there are non-egological intentions which can potentially be turned into lived-experience. Indeed, “if, from the ego, this same lived-experience later becomes patent, the intention takes on the act-mode of the *ego cogito*” (Husserl 2001, 449). In other words, both a lived experience and the

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<sup>33</sup> Ricoeur (1954, p. 102). On Husserl’s concept of monad, see Altobrando (2010); Mertens (2000, pp. 1–20). In these paragraphs of *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl reproduces the same argumentative pattern adopted in *Ideas II*: he starts from the pure Ego as Ego-pole (§22) and then, after discussing the persistent opinions, introduces the concept of the monad behind every *cogitatio* (§29).

<sup>34</sup> In Husserl 2002, 262 Husserl claims that ego’s particular characteristic is the coincidence “between absolute concreteness and individuality”.

<sup>35</sup> I cannot discuss these aspects here. On these topics, see De Santis (2023, pp. 113–39); De Santis (2021, pp. 425–434).

objective moment can be forgotten, but they “in no way disappear without a trace; it has merely become latent with regard to what has been constituted in it, it is *a possession in the form of habitus*, ready at any time to be awakened anew by an active association” (Husserl 1979a, 122).<sup>36</sup> The unity of the egological processes “is a universe of possibilities only in the universal unity-form of the flux, in which all particulars have their respective places as processes that flow within it” (Husserl 1960, 75). This latter is a kind of motivation which connect and rule each particular type of process. Each regularity, goes on Husserl, pertains “to a universal genesis, which is such that past, present, and future, become unitarily constituted over and over again, in a certain noetic-noematic formal structure of flowing modes of givenness” (Husserl 1960, 75). All the motivations at work here, “according to universal laws of genesis, produce a unity of universal genesis of the ego” (Husserl 1960, 75), which shapes Ego’s History.<sup>37</sup> The History of the Ego includes (i) all constitutions of all objectivities (both immanent and transcendent, ideal and real); (ii) all constitutive systems by which objects and categories of objects exist; (iii) the concrete ego as unity; (iv) the *Umwelt* as its correlate. As De Santis states, to consider this “a concrete ego without genesis and history is *a priori* impossible”,<sup>38</sup> and this also proves the intertwining of egological and historical dimensions discussed in the first part of this article.

Before concluding, I would like to return to Descartes’ *Meditations*, reconsidering them through the lens of Husserl’s investigations on history and the Ego’s activity of memory recollection, since it is through memory that the pure Ego achieves the self-grasping and thus the self-perception of its actual presence. Given that Husserl’s notion of temporality has no parallel in Descartes, phenomenological tools illuminate a particularly ambiguous aspect of the *Meditations*: the role of memory. Many scholars have discussed the role of memory in Descartes, but mostly with regard to its corporeal aspects, a dimension that cannot be at stake in the *Meditations*, since bodies’ existence is re-introduced only in *Meditation VI*.<sup>39</sup> The topic of

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<sup>36</sup> See also *Cartesian Meditations* §32: “in an act of judgment, I decide for the first time in favour of a being and a being-thus, the fleeting act passes; but from now on I am abidingly the Ego who is thus and so decided” (Husserl 1960, 66), as long as this conviction remains valid.

<sup>37</sup> Here, I cannot consider the role of the synthesis of association; however, as Husserl states, without these laws “there would be no subjectivity”, since phenomenology of association is “a higher continuation of the doctrine of original time-constitution” (Husserl 2001, 163). For a better account of this topic, see De Warren (2009). On Husserl’s memory, see Brough (1975).

<sup>38</sup> De Santis (2023, p. 131).

<sup>39</sup> On Descartes’ memory, see Ferrarin (2007); Frankfurt (2008, pp. 215–34); William (2005). Descartes discusses bodily and intellectual memory also in the following letters, without explaining how they are thematically related: to Mersenne, 6 August 1640 (Descartes 1996, vol. III, 143); to Mesland, 2 May 1644 (Descartes 1996, vol. IV, 114); to Arnauld, 4 June 1648 (Descartes 1996, vol. V, 192–94) and also into the *Conversation with Burman* (Descartes 1996, vol V, 148–50). On the topic of memory, it is important

memory is thus largely undertheorized in relation to the *Meditations*, and Descartes himself casts it into doubt because of its deceptions.<sup>40</sup> Yet, without memory, it would be impossible to connect what is gradually gained in each step of the *Meditations*. The *Meditations* advance because, from day to day, the truths discovered are retained by the meditator. On the contrary, Husserl shows how the transcendental Ego develops its own *habitus* and shapes its persistent opinions.<sup>41</sup>

Since memory is not thematically addressed in the *Meditations*, it would be unproductive to look for explicit references to it in the text. Consider, for instance, that the demonstration of God's existence in *Meditation III* is possible only because the Ego has already proven its own existence and retains the memory of the struggle involved in doubt. As Frankfurt notes, this is a problem: when Descartes "doubts the reliability of memory Descartes must necessarily doubt the reliability of his recollection that he has shown memory to be guaranteed by God".<sup>42</sup> It seems to me that the reliability of memory cannot be based on the memory of the demonstration of God's existence, if only because this demonstration presupposes precisely the possibility of recalling the evidence presented in *Meditation II*.<sup>43</sup> The issue also appears in Bourdin's commentary on the passage from *Meditation II*, in which Descartes examines the recollection of what the meditator once believed himself to be (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 17; AT VII 25). Bourdin asks.

Which man are you asking about, and what exactly are you asking when you ask what a man is? Do you mean the man I formerly imagined I was and believed myself to be the man I now maintain I am not, since renouncing my beliefs, thanks to you? If this is the man you are asking about, the man whom I used to have such a mistaken conception of, then he is some kind of compound of soul and body (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 323; AT VII 479).

According to Bourdin, certainty attaches not to present thinking but to the fact of having thought (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 363; AT VII 533–34). The locus of certainty thus shifts from thought in act to reflective awareness of it – a move comparable to Husserl's account of accessing the pure Ego via memory in §23 of *Ideas II*. Descartes replies to Bourdin by noting that the act of reflecting "is not required in order for a thinking substance to be superior to matter" (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 382; AT VII 559),

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to keep in mind that one of the aims of the *Regulae* is to make deduction as intuitive as possible in order "to pass from the first to the last so swiftly that memory is left with practically no role to play" (Descartes 1985 25; AT X 388). This statement is maintained also in the *Discours* (Descartes 1985, vol. I, 25; AT X 388).

<sup>40</sup> See *Meditation II* (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 16; AT VII 24).

<sup>41</sup> See, for instance, Husserl (1989, 118ff).

<sup>42</sup> Frankfurt (2008, p. 219).

<sup>43</sup> See Ferrarin (2007, p. 182).

since we are aware of our thinking.<sup>44</sup> Burman's critique also moves in this direction when he observes that the thought of being conscious is different from the activity of thinking itself, and that consequently one is not conscious of thinking, but of having thought. As Burman explains, "in order to have the thought that you are aware, you must move on to another thought", but in doing so you are "no longer thinking of the thing you were thinking of a moment ago" and so "you cannot be aware that you are thinking, but only that you were thinking" (Descartes 1976, 7; AT V 149). To this, Descartes replies that it is possible to think and reflect on what is thought, because "the soul is capable of thinking of more than one thing at the same time" (Descartes 1976, 7; AT V 149). What is surprising in Descartes' response to Burman is the insistence on what the mind is capable of doing without providing an adequate treatment of it, especially in light of the role of memory, which in *Meditations* remains fundamentally ambiguous. This leaves the readers bewildered, especially when considering the role of material memory, as described in *L'Homme*. As Sutton notes, without memory there would be no ego, because there would be no "connected story of one's life",<sup>45</sup> since memory boldly preserves traces of the experience.

Regarding Husserl, "if the *ego cogito* has past away (if I can even assert this much apodictically), I can recall it", but "the remembered lived-experience" remains uncertain (Husserl 2001, 451–52). This resembles the present certainty of the Cartesian *ego cogito*: "thus, I am arrested, so it seems, at the absolutely sterile *I am*" goes on Husserl (Husserl 2001, 452). However, through phenomenological reduction, it is possible to recover the past transcendental phenomenon *Ego cogito* from the earlier reflection. In this sense, all the memories of the Ego's past are directed to remembered intentional content and to its validity. Regardless of the mode in which it is given, the *Ego cogito*, in the unity of its phase and its originary being, is reproducible. Within remembering there is an intentional tendency whose "fulfillment leads steadily into a continuum of progressive rememberings so that a continuum of presentified presents, a continually fulfilled time is represented again" (Husserl 2001, 463). Thus, unlike Descartes, the phenomenologist puts out of play "the memorial belief in the past objectivity, but not [...] the belief in my past ego and my past lived-experiencing, and my past perceiving in which my past life was given perceptually" (Husserl 2001, 454).

In connecting the history of the ego with genetic investigations concerning the pure Ego, Husserl demonstrates that it is not possible to entirely repudiate one's

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<sup>44</sup> See *Replies II* (Descartes 1985, vol. II, 113; AT VII 160).

<sup>45</sup> Sutton (1998, p. 157, italics mine). The issue becomes even more complicated considering that in 1640 Descartes, in a letter to Meyssonier (Descartes 1996, vol. III, 18–21), refers to material memory in a way very similar to what he had written in *L'Homme*. See also the letter dated April 11, 1640 addressed to Mersenne (Descartes 1996, vol. III, 47–50).

history, even if this appears to be one of the very aims of Descartes' *Meditation I*. Descartes presents an Ego whose history does not seem to exist, and it is precisely for this reason that in *Meditations* history itself is schematized as a mere history of prejudices.<sup>46</sup> Thus, while for Descartes history does not guarantee the evidence of intuitive principles—and it is not by chance that the personal history presented in the *Discourse* attempts to do just that—, Husserl shows the contrary. From *Ideas II* to late works such as *Cartesian Meditations* and *Crisis*, Husserl grounds the pure Ego in the unity of the Monad, and, correspondingly, situates self-remembrance within habitualities and history. Thus, while Husserl's claims are deeply dependent on his conceptualization of the internal *Zeitbewußtseins*, and in this respect find no parallel in Descartes' *Meditations*, the phenomenological investigations nonetheless allow us to address a central problem in Descartes: the absence of a discussion of memory, which, however, is essential to the development of the *Meditations* themselves. Husserl's criticisms are therefore of fundamental importance, as they address the role of history in the Cartesian distinction between the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*. Indeed, while material things are "history-less realities", since they are "conditioned exclusively from the outside and are not conditioned by their own past" (Husserl 1989 II, 144), the same cannot be said for transcendental subject, whether that of Descartes or that of Husserl.

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<sup>46</sup> See Lachterman (1989, p. 130ff).

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