

A Critique of Martin Heidegger's Understanding of *lumen naturale*: Towards a Phenomenology  
of René Descartes' Natural Light

by

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## Abstract

Martin Heidegger claims that René Descartes ushered in an era of thinking that gave humans the power to limit the realm of what “is” to whatever can be calculable and dominated. Being itself is consequently taken for granted and glossed over. This understanding of Descartes leads Heidegger to dismiss that the *lumen naturale*, Descartes’ most trustworthy power for discovering truth, guides thinking into the clearing where thinking and Being “presence” to each other. Heidegger suggests that the *lumen naturale*, or natural light, is a faculty that projects light only onto entities to dominate them. However, this appears conjectural on Heidegger’s behalf as Descartes never fully defined the power of the natural light. In fact, when looking at Descartes’ philosophy and the scholarly work of John Morris, Deborah Boyle, and James D. Collins, the natural light, on its surface, appears to be an experience where a light strikes the intellect to reveal foundational axioms of metaphysics. This surface level account of the natural light, interestingly, seems to correspond to Heidegger’s own phenomenological account of thinking. Heidegger’s phenomenology of thinking thus appears as a worthwhile theory to properly illuminate the natural light. When illuminating the natural light through Heidegger’s phenomenology, it is discovered that the *lumen naturale*, actually, calls Descartes into an experience where Being and thinking “presence” to each other. In turn, Heidegger’s understanding of the *lumen naturale* in Descartes’ philosophy shows itself to be uncharitable.

## Preface

This thesis is an original work by Ryan W Garrett. No part of this has been previously published.

## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

For all true thought remains open to more than one interpretation—and this by reason of its nature.

—Martin Heidegger<sup>1</sup>

In various works, Martin Heidegger claims that thinking is only thinking if it is focused on Being. However, he also claims that appreciating the depth of this proclamation is difficult because ‘Modern Philosophy’ has glossed over thinking about the clearing of Being. Instead, Modern Philosophy has demarcated human beings as the entity that limits the power of what “is” to whatever can be calculable and dominated. However, when this occurs, Modern Philosophy interrogates entities within the clearing of Being, but not the clearing or Being itself. To recall in thought this clearing of Being, Heidegger claims we must be called into thinking. We are called into thinking by what gives us food for thought, and nothing gives us more food for thought than the unconcealedness of Being itself. He describes this call as a light: “When we attempt to learn what is called thinking and what calls for thinking, are we not getting lost in the reflection that thinks on thinking? *Yet all along our way a steady light is cast on thinking.*”<sup>2</sup> According to Heidegger, thinking is directed by a steady light, which is gathered in the “inmost mind, the heart, the heart's core.”<sup>3</sup> If we incline towards the light, we are led into the essential nature of thinking where thinking and Being “presence” to each other.

With this frame Heidegger, in his lecture *What is Called Thinking?*, reviews the history of philosophy and classifies certain thinkers according to their ability to pay heed to this light and place themselves ‘into the current’<sup>4</sup> of thinking. He roughly demarcates three categories of

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, translated by J. Glenn Garry (New York: HarperCollins Publishing, 1976), 71.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 28. Emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

thinkers. The highest classification—the thinkers “par excellence”<sup>5</sup>—is for those thinkers that focused on Being and did “nothing less than attempt to take to heart That which calls us to think.”<sup>6</sup> Heidegger identifies Parmenides, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, among others, as the West’s most esteemed thinkers.<sup>7</sup> The second category is for those thinkers who, at times, paid heed to the call of Being, but ultimately were too inculcated by Modern Philosophy’s dispositions to appreciate the call of thinking. Heidegger places Friedrich Nietzsche and Immanuel Kant in this category.<sup>8</sup> The last category is for those thinkers who confuse and confound thinking. Heidegger places René Descartes in this category. He claims that in striving for certain and indubitable knowledge, “Descartes claims unconditional certainty for its tenets. This reflection, often advanced and seemingly convincing, confounds various trains of thought and their various levels.”<sup>9</sup>

Yet, Heidegger’s classification of Descartes is perplexing given that Descartes too discusses a light that directs him into thinking. In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes’ meditator discovers the proposition “I am, I exist” cannot be doubted any time it is thought. He credits this important discovery of the *Cogito* to the power of something he calls the “natural light.”<sup>10</sup> The “natural light”<sup>11</sup> is a power that reveals truths that cannot be subject to doubt. When the meditator describes the experience of the natural light, he states that “a great light in the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>7</sup> See the following pages in *What is Called Thinking?* for Heidegger’s esteem of these thinkers: For Aristotle and Plato see page 197, for Socrates see page 17, and for Parmenides see the whole second half of the lecture course.

<sup>8</sup> In *What is Called Thinking?*, see page 213 and 243 for why Kant and Nietzsche are classified here.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>10</sup> René Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy” in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume II*, translated and edited by John Cottingham et. al (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 27.

René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 13 Volumes, edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Cerf, 1897-1913), VII, 39.

<sup>11</sup> Descartes also uses the phrases “light of reason,” “natural light of reason,” “light of mind,” and “light in the understanding” to refer to the *lumen naturale*.

intellect was followed by a great inclination in the will....”<sup>12</sup> For the meditator, the experience of the natural light is twofold: a great light strikes the mind and the will follows this light. This experience is most trustworthy in his quest for ascertaining truth.

Heidegger denies that the Cartesian natural light, or *lumen naturale*, guides thinking into the clearing where thinking and Being “presence” to each other.

Philosophy does speak about the light of reason, but does not heed the opening of Being. The *lumen naturale*, the light of reason, throws light only on openness [*das Offene*, the Open, what is open]. It does concern the opening, but so little does it form it that it needs it in order to be able to illuminate what is present in the opening [*die Lichtung*, the clearing].<sup>13</sup>

Heidegger claims the natural light does not heed the opening of Being. It is partially concerned with the opening or clearing of Being, insofar as this clearing allows humans to think about entities, but the natural light only illuminates the entities present in the opening and does not concern itself with opening of Being itself. Rather, the natural light points towards and illuminates entities so they may become a graspable object for ‘Cartesian thinking.’ As a result, the natural light on Heidegger’s account is just another confounding concept that ignores Being.

This conclusion by Heidegger, though, appears hasty since Descartes does not define or describe what he means by the “natural light,” nor what it is preoccupied with or what it is not. Hence for Heidegger to make such an unequivocal claim about the natural light suggests either that he knows something more about the *lumen naturale* than Descartes ever thematized, or is making a quick and potentially careless judgement about the light without proper inquiry.

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<sup>12</sup> Descartes: CSM, II, “Meditations,” 41. AT, VII, 59.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking” in *Time and Being*, edited and translated by Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 66. It is important to note that Heidegger does not have just Descartes in mind when he critiques the *lumen naturale*. Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas, among others, also have accounts of the natural light.

In the following thesis, I provide an account of Descartes' natural light. Utilizing Heidegger's phenomenology of thinking, I show that the role the 'steady light' plays in Heidegger's own work is similar to the role the natural light plays for Descartes, as it too calls Descartes into an essential state of thinking that leads to God, the most Being-like aspect of his project. As a result, the natural light does, in a way, heed the opening of Being. Thus, I determine that Heidegger is uncharitable in his characterization of the *lumen naturale* and thereby of Descartes' philosophy as a whole.

To argue for this interpretation, my thesis is arranged in four chapters. In the first chapter, I lay out Heidegger's understanding of Cartesianism. This chapter provides Heidegger's account of Cartesian thinking and how he believes it confounds apprehending the clearing of Being. This background is essential to understanding Heidegger's take on the "natural light." This account motivates the second chapter where I survey Descartes' works and the scholarship surrounding his usage of the natural light to evaluate Heidegger's claim about the *lumen naturale*. After reviewing the work of John Morris, Deborah Boyle, and James D. Collins, I develop a preparatory account of the natural light that appears to run counter to Heidegger's characterization of what he finds in Descartes. However, this preparatory account, admittedly, is only preliminary. To develop a fuller account of the natural light, I suggest we use phenomenology to illuminate the *lumen naturale*. Thus, in chapter three, I utilize Heidegger's phenomenology of thinking to help illuminate Descartes' natural light because Heidegger also discusses a light that radiates from thinking. This discussion shows that the experience of the natural light plays a similar role to the 'call of thinking' and "being-thoughtful" in Heidegger's own work. This discovery allows me to appraise Heidegger's understanding of Cartesianism in

the fourth and final chapter. This appraisal yields that Heidegger is uncharitable in his characterization of the *lumen naturale* and thus Descartes' philosophy.

## Chapter 1: Heidegger's Understanding of 'Cartesian thinking'

To better understand why Heidegger believes Descartes ignores the clearing of Being, we must bring into view Heidegger's understanding of Cartesianism and its influence on the history of thinking. Providing this background will also be essential to understanding Heidegger's account of the natural light. To appreciate Heidegger's understanding of Cartesianism, we must briefly sketch Heidegger's characterization of thinking before Descartes.

Heidegger classifies thinking into two ages prior to Descartes: the Ancient Greek Age and the Middle Ages. According to Ancient Greek philosophy, humans were defined by their ability to take in the world for what it was in itself.<sup>14</sup> Humans in the Ancient Greek Age were more concerned with being spectators to what appeared in front of them as opposed to actively appropriating and calculating qualities of entities. That is, instead of seeing a tree as, say, merely an object to be appropriated for firewood, they would marvel at the existence of the tree and how it exists. Heidegger claims, "To be beheld by what *is*, to be included and maintained within its openness and in that way to be borne along by it...that is the essence of man in the great age of the Greeks."<sup>15</sup> The Greeks did their best to "remain exposed"<sup>16</sup> to what existed in itself, and their thinking was directed by the entities that appeared to them. Alternatively, in the Middle Ages, according to Heidegger, human beings were defined by God: "For the Middle Ages...that which *is*, is...created by the personal Creator-God as the highest cause."<sup>17</sup> In the Middle Ages, existence was defined by God. As a result, thinking was directed towards knowledge of divinity:

The highest knowledge and teaching is theology as the interpretation of the divine word of revelation, which is set down in Scripture and proclaimed by the Church.

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<sup>14</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture" in *Questions Concerning Technology*, translated by William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 131.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis Added.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 130. Emphasis Added.

Here, to know is not to search out; rather it is to understand rightly the authoritative Word and the authorities proclaiming it.<sup>18</sup>

In the Middle Ages, thinking was turned towards the authoritative Word of God. Hence, thinking was concerned with revelation, and truth and existence were determined by God. Thus, in both the Ancient Greek Age and Middle Ages, human thinking was determined, directed, and founded upon something that was beyond humans themselves. In the Ancient Greek Age, thinking was determined and guided by Being itself and in the Middle Ages thinking was determined and guided by God. Accordingly, ‘human thinking’ was not directed by its own power, nor was human thinking able to apprehend “truth” without appealing to something beyond it. According to Heidegger, this changed when Descartes ushered in the “beginning of a new thinking.”<sup>19</sup>

According to Heidegger, at the end of the Middle Ages in the European tradition, human beings had to refer to the Authoritative Word of God to apprehend truth.<sup>20</sup> That is, the Christian bible, church doctrine, and religious authorities had an exclusive claim on “truth.” Wanting to liberate himself from the constraints of “biblical Christian revealed truth and church doctrine,”<sup>21</sup> Descartes sought to ground metaphysics in “man himself for man himself.”<sup>22</sup> To accomplish this, humans had to secure knowledge without appealing to anything beyond themselves:

[L]iberation *from* the revelational certainty of salvation had to be intrinsically a freeing *to* a certainty in which man makes secure for himself the true as the known of his own knowing. That was possible only through self-liberating man’s guaranteeing for himself the certainty of the knowable. Such a thing could happen, however, only insofar as man decided, by himself and for himself, what for him, should be “knowable” and what knowing and the making secure of the known, i.e., certainty, should mean.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volume IV*, translated by Frank A. Capuzzi and edited by David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 97.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>23</sup> Heidegger, “The Age,” 148.

With moving away from Church doctrine and the certainty of revelation, Descartes had to guarantee for himself the certainty of the knowable. This was only possible if humans decided and developed a criterion for what was “knowable” in reference to the human intellect and the human intellect alone. Heidegger claims Descartes accomplished this through “deliberative representation.”<sup>24</sup>

‘Cartesian thinking’ as deliberative representation can be defined as the human objectification of entities into calculable, mental objects: “[O]bjectifying of whatever *is*, is accomplished in a setting-before, a representing, that aims at bringing each particular being before it in such a way that man who calculates can be sure, and that means be certain, of that being.”<sup>25</sup> Entities in the world are objectified by the human intellect and are represented to the mind like pictures.<sup>26</sup> These representations are “deliberative” as an entity can only become represented to the human intellect if it can be categorized, broken-down, or calculated whether mathematically, historically, morally, biologically, physically, etc., in a word, humanly. For example, when a botanist, thinking Cartesianly, encounters a tree, the botanist begins objectifying the tree based on the tree’s qualities: the botanist will note that this tree is perhaps fifty feet tall, has broad leaves that are deciduous, and produces nuts that are roughly four to five centimeters big and cup-shaped. After noting these qualities, the botanist can then be assured that the tree is an Oak belonging to the Beech Family according to its taxonomic classification. These “qualities” of the tree are objectifications of certain characteristics of the tree, which humans then classify according to a discipline of study, like botany. The discipline is considered a reliable source for truth that the botanist can use to check the veracity of her perception. Hence,

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<sup>24</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 106.

<sup>25</sup> Heidegger, “The Age,” 127.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

in objectifying entities into representations, Descartes does not need to appeal to Church doctrine or something beyond himself to be certain of the truth of an entity. Rather, insofar as an entity is objectified, humans by and for themselves possess the authority on what is knowable.

Moreover, in objectifying any entity into a representation, human beings are represented and justified as the ‘demarcators’ of truth. In virtue of objectifying an entity into a calculable representation, humans are always referenced as the objectifiers.<sup>27</sup> Thus, every representation refers to human beings as the ‘objective point,’ in turn objectifying humans into the “thinking-representing being.”<sup>28</sup> When humans are objectified into the thinking-representing being, or rather, the ‘entity-who-calculates-all-that-exists’, humans become the ground of existence, *viz.* the subject:

[M]an is, in this way, necessarily represented-together-with [every representation]; only because man who frees himself to himself belongs necessarily within the *subiectum* [that-which-lies-before] of this freedom—only for this reason can and must man himself be transformed into an exceptional being, into a subject which, with regard to that which truly is, which is primary, has preeminence among all *subiecta*.<sup>29</sup>

When humans become the thinking-representing being, humans transform into an exceptional being. That is, humans become the “subject” and therefore become the being to which all of existence must refer back.<sup>30</sup> And when humans become the subject, or ground, for all calculable, objectified entities, Descartes accomplishes his goal of securing truth as certainty for humans themselves. This is because every representational thinking always reaffirms that humans by and for themselves are “the relational center of that which is as such.”<sup>31</sup> Consequently, when humans become the relational center of all that is, only the entities that can be objectified into

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<sup>27</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 106.

<sup>28</sup> Heidegger, “The Age,” 151.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

representations “exist.” Heidegger writes that through deliberative representation, “What *is*, in its entirety, is now taken in such a way that it first ‘is’ in being and only ‘is’ in being to the extent that it is set up by man, who represents and sets forth.”<sup>32</sup> In Cartesian thinking, only when an entity is objectified in relation to human beings does it ever “receive the seal of Being.”<sup>33</sup>

Heidegger finds this problematic in his quest to think about Being: “Where anything that is has become the object of representing, it first incurs in a certain manner a loss of Being.”<sup>34</sup>

How does this occur? First, it is important to note that, hearkening back to the Ancient Greek Age, “that which *is*” is beyond human representation:

That which *is*, is that which arises and opens itself, which, as what presences, comes upon man as the one who presences, i.e., comes upon the one who himself opens himself to what presences in that he apprehends it. That which *is* does not come into being at all through the fact that man first looks upon it, in the sense of a representing that has the character of subjective perception. Rather, man is the one who is looked upon by that which *is*; he is the one who is—in company with itself—gathered toward presencing, by that which opens itself.<sup>35</sup>

Entities in the world exist beyond deliberative representation and, in fact, it is humans who are “looked upon” by entities and appropriated by them, not the other way around. That is, entities open themselves up to the one who is receptive to their presence. To clarify this point, we can utilize our botanist who thinks Cartesianly. In virtue of encountering the tree, the botanist is receptive to the presence of the tree. However, the presence of the tree as “that which arises and opens itself” to the botanist is not thought about in her thinking. Instead, the tree only appears in her thinking as an “object” for her, the representing subject. This “object” is then broken down and classified according to “botany,” a human developed discipline of study. The presence of the tree and how it appears to the botanist is taken for granted and glossed over.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 129-130. Emphasis added.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 131.

Accordingly, when humans become the relational center as subject, humans engender “the unconditional delimiting forth of the power of possible objectification and the right to decide regarding objectification.”<sup>36</sup> Human beings limit the power of what is to whatever can be calculable and “dominated”<sup>37</sup> and set up this ‘new world’ through Cartesian thinking. Yet Heidegger proclaims that the clearing of Being is incalculable.<sup>38</sup> As a result, whatever becomes “incalculable remains the invisible shadow that is cast around all things everywhere when man has been transformed into *subiectum*.”<sup>39</sup> Since the clearing of Being cannot be set up or dominated, it is not explicitly thought about in Cartesian thinking. That is, the clearing of Being itself withdraws into the “invisible shadow” all around ‘Cartesian thinking:’ humans conditioned into thinking ‘Cartesianly’ will only perceive this loss “vaguely and unclearly.”<sup>40</sup>

It is for these reasons that Heidegger believes Descartes obscures the clearing of Being in his thinking. Heidegger claims the most fundamental and important task of thinking is to think about Being. Yet with Cartesian thinking, the clearing of Being withdraws from our thinking. Thus, as previously stated, Descartes stifles thinking qua thinking: “Descartes claims unconditional certainty for its tenets. This reflection, often advanced and seemingly convincing, confounds various trains of thought and their various levels.”<sup>41</sup> And since, “Thinking is thinking only when it *recalls* in thought εὐν [Being]...,”<sup>42</sup> Heidegger claims that as long as we think ‘Cartesianly’ “we are still not thinking.”<sup>43</sup> Hence the more pervasive and influential Cartesian thinking is, the more we are withdrawn from Being.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 151

<sup>37</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 117.

<sup>38</sup> Heidegger, “The Age,” 135.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>42</sup> Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, 244.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 4.

With Heidegger's account of Cartesianism complete, we can better understand why Heidegger quickly and unequivocally dismisses that the *lumen naturale*, Descartes' most trustworthy power for discovering truth, ever guides a thinker's attention toward the clearing of Being:

Philosophy does speak about the light of reason, but does not heed the opening of Being. The *lumen naturale*, the light of reason, throws light only on openness [*das Offene*, the Open, what is open]. It does concern the opening, but so little does it form it that it needs it in order to be able to illuminate what is present in the opening [*die Lichtung*, the clearing].<sup>44</sup>

As stated in the Introduction, Heidegger claims the natural light does not heed the opening of Being. It is partially concerned with the opening or clearing of Being, insofar as this clearing allows humans to think about entities, but the natural light only illuminates the entities present in the opening and does not concern itself with opening of Being itself. Accordingly, the natural light can never guide a thinker to recall Being in thought.

Given these criticisms, then, we should expect that when we inquire into Descartes' works that the natural light fits Heidegger's depictions of Cartesian thinking. That is, we should expect that when Descartes discusses the natural light he discusses it as an aspect of the mind that lights up entities; or, maybe we should expect that the natural light is a faculty that cast light onto entities and correspondingly evaluates them in a calculable way, or, using Heidegger's more forceful rhetoric, dominates them. Accordingly, this domination, then, should reinforce humans as the relational center—the dominators—of all that “is” since humans are the ones who ultimately give the seal of Being to entities. The natural light, then, should be within the full power of the Cartesian mind, and actively objectify and estimate entities in correspondence with a particular human function.

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<sup>44</sup> Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy,” 66.

However, as we will see in the next chapter, this is not quite right. Descartes never explicitly proclaims what the natural light is, or what it is concerned with. As a result, to evaluate Heidegger's claim about the natural light, and consequently his characterization of Cartesian thinking, we need to delve deeper into Descartes' works and the scholarship surrounding his usage of the natural light. What this will reveal, among other things, is that Descartes does not posit the light as a projecting light that dominates entities. Rather, the natural light calls upon Descartes and reveals truths to him.

## Chapter 2: Descartes and his Commentators on the Natural Light

In the previous chapter, I characterized Heidegger's understanding of Cartesianism. Heidegger accuses Descartes of ushering in an era of thinking defined by "deliberative representation." In deliberative representation, entities are objectified and dominated by the human intellect. When this occurs, Heidegger claims our thinking does not apprehend the clearing of Being. This characterization of Descartes led Heidegger to unequivocally claim that the *lumen naturale*, or the natural light, the most trustworthy power Descartes has for ascertaining truth, does not head Being. Instead, Heidegger suggests that the natural light is a light that projects from the mind to illuminate entities so they can become objectified and calculable to the human intellect. However, in this chapter, I will show that Heidegger's characterization of the *lumen naturale* does not correspond to Descartes' account of the natural light, at least on its surface. Admittedly, Descartes never fully defines the natural light or its operation. Thus, to develop a better picture of the natural light, we will review commentaries from John Morris, Deborah Boyle, and James D. Collins. By surveying and assessing these commentaries in the light of Descartes' philosophy, we will discover that the natural light is a privileged experience that reveals foundational axioms of Descartes' project.

In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes' meditator seeks the foundations for clear and certain knowledge. To accomplish this goal, he starts by doubting his previous beliefs: he doubts the existence of sense-perceived objects, he doubts the existence of his body, and doubts both empirical and mathematical sciences. He even grants that God could be fictitious, and heuristically posits that there could be an evil genius that constantly deceives him. Yet, in the face of these doubts, Descartes discovers something indubitable: "At last I have discovered it – thought;

this alone is inseparable from me. I am, I exist – that is certain.”<sup>45</sup> Descartes ascertains that in virtue of thinking, he must at minimum exist. Thus, the proposition “I am, I exist” cannot be doubted any time it is thought. He credits this important discovery of the *Cogito* to the power of something he calls the “natural light:”

Whatever is revealed to me by the natural light – *for example that from the fact that I am doubting it follows that I exists, and so on* – cannot in anyway be open to doubt. This is because there cannot be another faculty, or power for distinguishing truth from falsehood, both as trustworthy as the natural light and also capable of showing me that such things are not true.<sup>46</sup>

The “natural light,” or *lumen naturale*, is a power that reveals truths that cannot be subject to doubt. For Descartes, this is the most trustworthy power available in his quest for ascertaining indubitable knowledge. In the *Meditations*, the first discovery revealed to Descartes by the power of the natural light is the *Cogito*. The meditator will claim that six propositions in total are revealed to him by way of the natural light:

1. I am, I exist (for as long as I am thinking), or the *Cogito*
2. There must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in its effect.
3. Ideas in the mind are like pictures or images, which are less perfect than the things they represent.
4. The distinction between preservation and creation is only a conceptual one.
5. Fraud and deception necessarily proceed from defect.
6. What is done cannot be undone.<sup>47</sup>

Each of these propositions are immune to hyperbolic doubt. The meditator will use each of these ideas to limit, focus, exemplify, or establish his metaphysical foundations and justify his project.

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<sup>45</sup> Descartes: CSM, II, “Meditations,” 18. AT, VII, 27.

<sup>46</sup> Descartes: CSM, II, “Meditations,” 27. AT, VII, 38. Emphasis added.

<sup>47</sup> For the first claim see: CSM, II, “Meditations,” 27. AT, VII, 38. For the second claim see: CSM, II, “Meditations,” 28. AT, VII, 40. For the third claim see: CSM, II, “Meditations,” 29. AT, VII, 42. For the fourth claim see: CSM, II, “Meditations,” 33. AT, VII, 49. For the fifth claim see: CSM, II, “Meditations,” 35. AT, VII, 52. For the sixth claim see: CSM, II, “Meditations,” 57. AT, VII, 82. The sixth claim is, admittedly, not as foundational as the other five propositions. In fact, the sixth proposition is used as an example for distinguishing principles that are bestowed upon the meditator by God and not nature. However, because it is a revelation of the natural light in the *Meditations* it is include in my account.

Beyond the *Meditations*, Descartes discusses the natural light sixty more times throughout his other works and correspondence. However, he never fully defines the natural light, which has been a contributing factor to the sparse commentary the *lumen naturale* has received amongst scholars.<sup>48</sup> Despite this, there is a limited amount of commentary worth surveying to orient our discussion in developing an understanding of the natural light.

In his article “Descartes’ Natural Light,” John Morris seeks to track down the meaning of the natural light by primarily analyzing Descartes’ *Meditations*. Morris argues that the function of the natural light in the *Meditations* is to validate or justify “the axioms which are used in the proofs of the existence and veracity of God.”<sup>49</sup> In the *Meditations*, Descartes uses the revelation that “there must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in its effect” in his proof of the existence of God. Utilizing this revelation, the meditator claims that since the idea of God is infinite, and since he, the meditator, is finite, the idea of God must have been stamped upon him by a Creator as he does not have the requisite infinity to produce the idea of God himself.<sup>50</sup> And because the natural light reveals claims essential to the proof of God, and since, as Morris claims, “the senses cannot possibly be the source of our knowledge of...God and the soul,”<sup>51</sup> the natural light must act upon the mind. However, knowing that the natural light reveals essential perceptions about God and that it acts upon the mind does not suffice to explain entirely what the natural light is. To apprehend the *lumen naturale*, we must investigate the Cartesian mind.

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<sup>48</sup> Over the last 50 years, the Philosopher’s index lists only six articles in English specifically dedicated to the topic (see John Morris’ “Descartes’ Natural Light” and “Cartesian Certainty”, Peter A. Schouls’ “Cartesian certainty and the ‘natural light’”, Stephen H. Daniel’s “Descartes’ Treatment of ‘lumen naturale’”, Deborah Boyle’s “Descartes’ Natural Light Reconsidered”, and Louis E. Loeb’s “Was Descartes Sincere in his Appeal to the Natural Light?”).

<sup>49</sup> John Morris, “Descartes’ Natural Light,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 11, no. 2 (1973), 170.

<sup>50</sup> See Descartes: CSM, II, “Meditations,” 29-31. AT, VII, 40-45.

<sup>51</sup> Morris, “Descartes’ Natural Light,” 170.

Morris argues that the Cartesian mind is divided into a passive power and active power. In a letter to Regius, Descartes divides the mind into passive and active powers: “strictly speaking, understanding is the passivity of the mind and willing is its activity.”<sup>52</sup> The mind’s understanding allows him “to perceive the ideas which are subjects for possible judgments,”<sup>53</sup> in turn making it passive, whereas the mind’s will “simply consists in our ability to do or not do something (that is, to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid),”<sup>54</sup> in turn making it active.<sup>55</sup> Following this distinction in the mind, Morris argues that considered in itself, understanding—the passive half of the mind—can be further demarcated into an active power and passive power:

Actively, it brings concepts or ideas into consciousness; it is then called the "power of conceiving." We can conceive nonexistent objects..., and we can conceive false propositions, but we can also form concepts or ideas of an extremely important sort, which are called "clear and distinct." [...] In addition to this quasi-active role in the production of concepts, the understanding also functions in a passive sense; this ability is called the "power of cognition".... It is by means of this faculty that...we are able to recognize truth or falsehood. An important variety of knowledge can thus be obtained directly, simply by recognizing that certain things are true.<sup>56</sup>

Morris breaks down the understanding, the passive power of the mind, into the active ‘power of conceiving’ and the passive ‘power of cognition.’ In the understanding, the active ‘power of conceiving’ produces both clear and distinct ideas and confused ideas. How we know whether an idea is true is due to the passive ‘power of cognition.’ The power of cognition recognizes “truth

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<sup>52</sup>René Descartes, “To Regius, May 1641” in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume 3*, translated and edited by John Cottingham et. al (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 182.

René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 13 Volumes, edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Cerf, 1897-1913), III, 372.

<sup>53</sup> Descartes: CSM, II, “Meditations,” 39. AT, VII, 56.

<sup>54</sup> Descartes: CSM, II, “Meditations,” 39. AT, VII, 57.

<sup>55</sup> There have been disputes over this understanding of the mind. I do not intend to weigh in too heavily on this debate or demarcate the powers of the understanding. For my purposes, it will be enough to show that the natural light has both a passive and active component. For more discussions on possible passive and active distinctions of the mind see Albert Balz’s *Descartes and the Modern Mind*, Susan James’ *Passion and Action*, Peter Schouls’ “Descartes and the Autonomy of Reason”, John Cottingham’s “Descartes and the Voluntariness of Belief,” and Deborah Boyle’s “Descartes’ Natural Light Reconsidered.”

<sup>56</sup> Morris, “Descartes’ Natural Light,” 174-5.

or falsehood” by giving us a click of recognition. That is, when a concept is presented to the mind, the passive ‘power of cognition’ “simply gives a click of recognition when a true idea is brought before it.”<sup>57</sup> For example, when I am presented with the mathematical problem of ‘What is 42 divided by 7?’ and I ponder it for a split second, but then “get” that the answer must be ‘6’, this experience of “getting it” is the ‘power of cognition’s’ “click of recognition” informing me that ‘6’ is a true answer.

Morris identifies the power of cognition as what Descartes means by the “natural light:”

For [the power of cognition] of the understanding, and *for this function exclusively*, Descartes uses the term “natural light.” The natural light, then, is a faculty of the pure understanding which *cannot* be called into doubt, because it is the very basis upon which doubt must be justified, if it is to be justified at all.<sup>58</sup>

The “click of recognition” native to the ‘power of cognition’ in the understanding is the natural light. When we experience ‘getting something’ and it ‘clicks,’ on Morris’ account, we experience the natural light. And because the natural light’s sole function is recognizing true ideas, it cannot be called into doubt and is, in fact, what justifies doubt: if we receive a ‘click of recognition’ when evaluating a certain idea, then we have a reason to doubt obscure perceptions that initially clouded our apprehension of this idea. That is, say, in evaluating a problem, if I receive a click of recognition in response to a proposed solution, I would know this idea is true and thus can subsequently doubt the other proposed solutions I may have pondered. This explains why the natural light eludes the hyperbolic doubt that begins the *Meditations*: it is only by the power of the natural light that we are able to recognize that something is doubtful at all.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

However, while I previously gave the heuristic example of the “click of recognition” in reference to mathematics, Morris claims that the chief and only relevant “role of the natural light is to furnish...causal principles:”<sup>59</sup>

Although, from time to time, [Descartes] mentions some other truisms as possible revelations of the natural light, only the causal principles play any active role in his arguments. We can say, then, that the role of the natural light is the validation of the causal principles, and it is this that gives them their metaphysical certainty.<sup>60</sup>

On Morris’ take, the only relevant role of the natural light is to reveal causal principles. The causal principle that Morris has in mind is “there must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in its effect.” This metaphysical principle, as previously mentioned, is foundational to Descartes’ proofs of God in the *Meditations*. Therefore, Morris concludes, that the natural light is the click of recognition that reveals “the axioms upon which our proof of God depends.”<sup>61</sup>

Morris’ account points us in a positive direction in elucidating the natural light. Morris identifies the natural light with a specific experience of “getting” something. Moreover, Morris demonstrates why Descartes places weight in the natural light: the natural light is the power that reveals causal principles that are essential to proving the existence of God in the *Meditations*, which are essential in obtaining an indubitable metaphysics. However, this account is not without complications.

In her article “Descartes’ Natural Light Reconsidered,” Deborah Boyle takes issue with Morris’ account of the Cartesian mind. Boyle accuses Morris of creating a false distinction in the understanding by claiming it has both an active role, by way of the power of conceiving, and a

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 185.

passive role, by way of the power of cognition. Boyle traces Morris' steps and identifies that his "strategy is first to 'show that conceiving and recognizing are functions of the understanding,' and then to argue that conceiving is active and recognizing is passive."<sup>62</sup> This strategy, Boyle contends, gets off the ground based on Morris' understanding of the French words *connaître* and *concevoir*: *connaître* Morris must understand as the passive "recognizing" and *concevoir* as the active "conceiving."<sup>63</sup> Accordingly, if Descartes were to explicitly discuss *connaître* and *concevoir* as *separate functions* of the understanding, and not to refer them to the understanding *in general*, then Morris' reading could be plausible. However, Boyle argues this is not the case:

[Morris'] evidence for [claiming that *connaître* and *concevoir* are demarcated functions of the understanding] is the French version of the Fourth Meditation passage in which Descartes distinguishes the intellect from the will. Descartes indeed refers to a *puissance de connaître*, which he equates with the *entendement*, or understanding, and to a *puissance d'élire*, or *volonté*, will (AT IX 45). Thus the *puissance de connaître* seems to be equivalent to the understanding in general. On the next page, Descartes refers to "la puissance d'entendre ou de concevoir" (AT IX 46); again, the *puissance de concevoir* is equated with the understanding. In other words, *connaître* and *concevoir* both seem to pertain to the understanding in general, not to distinct parts of the understanding.<sup>64</sup>

Morris' does not have textual support for his distinction: "*connaître* and *concevoir* both seem to pertain to the understanding in general, [and] not to distinct parts of the understanding." As a result, "recognizing" and "conceiving" are not distinct functions of the understanding, but are rather the powers of the understanding as a whole.

Furthermore, Boyle continues that Morris' account "ignores the role of the will."<sup>65</sup> Based on Morris' reading of the understanding, the passive half of the mind, by itself can both conceive ideas and recognize whether an idea is true or false. Yet, according to Descartes' theory of

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<sup>62</sup> Deborah Boyle, "Descartes' Natural Light Reconsidered," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 37, no. 4 (1999), 604.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 604-5.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 610.

judgment, our ability to judge the truth or falsity of a perception is due to the dialectal relationship between the understanding and the will. Judgements can be erroneous due to our freedom of the will.<sup>66</sup> The freedom of the “will is wider than that of the intellect,”<sup>67</sup> thus when we affirm or deny something without following the perception of the intellect or understanding, we err in our judgments. Conversely, when the will follows clear and distinct perceptions of the intellect, we make sound judgments. On Morris’ reading, then, the understanding, “*already* recognizes that [a] claim is true. And if that is so, then it seems a judgment has somehow already been made, *before* the will enters the picture.”<sup>68</sup> If this were true “it would render the will superfluous in Descartes’ system.”<sup>69</sup> If the understanding can by itself determine what is true or false without the will, then we trivialize the role of the will in Descartes’ system. Moreover, when the meditator describes the experience of the natural light, he states that “a great light in the intellect was followed by a great inclination in the will....”<sup>70</sup> For the meditator, the experience of the natural light is twofold: a great light strikes the mind and the will follows this light. While the first half of this experience—that is, the light striking the intellect—is passive, the second half of this experience—the will following the light—is indubitably active. Thus, while Morris is correct in claiming that the *phenomenon* of the natural light isolated from the *totality of the experience* of the natural light is passive, he misses discussing the role of the will in the experience of the natural light.

In light of these complications, Boyle claims that “the natural light should not be taken as a power of *recognition* at all,”<sup>71</sup> and provides her own positive account of the natural light.

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<sup>66</sup> In responding to an objection raised by Thomas Hobbes, Descartes claims that “Our freedom is very evident by the natural light” (Descartes: CSM, II, “Objections and Replies,” 134. AT, VII, 191.).

<sup>67</sup> Descartes: CSM, II, “Meditations,” 40. AT, VII, 58.

<sup>68</sup> Boyle, “Descartes’ Natural Light,” 611.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Descartes: CSM, II, “Meditations,” 41. AT, VII, 59.

<sup>71</sup> Boyle, “Descartes’ Natural Light,” 611.

Seeing Morris' error regarding the will, Boyle argues that the will plays a vital role in the natural light:

[A]lthough by "natural light" strictly speaking Descartes means only the perception of certain ideas in the intellect, which is a passive operation, there is a sense in which the natural light is active, insofar as the active will inevitably asserts the truth of whatever proposition has been illuminated by the natural light.<sup>72</sup>

Boyle argues that though the natural light is "strictly speaking" a passive phenomenon, there is an active operation of the will in the actual experience of the *lumen naturale* since the will "asserts the truth of whatever proposition has been illuminated by the natural light." However, while we know that Boyle sees the will playing an active role in assenting to the natural light, what is the *lumen naturale*? She argues that the natural light is a figurative depiction for the perception of clear and distinct ideas:

The truths illuminated by the natural light, then, are propositions to which the will feels compelled to assent: some proposition is perceived so clearly and distinctly that it is as if a great light has illuminated the proposition in the mind, and the will immediately grants that the proposition is true.<sup>73</sup>

Recalling Descartes' theory of judgment, Boyle argues that when the understanding perceives clear and distinct perceptions, the will "feels compelled" to instantaneously affirm the veracity of these ideas. When this occurs "it is *as if* a great light has illuminated the proposition of the mind." Thus, according to Boyle the natural light is a figurative description for the mind perceiving and affirming, by way of the will, clear and distinct perceptions.

This reading of the natural light, initially, is plausible. In the *Meditations*, the meditator "lays it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true."<sup>74</sup> If one clearly and distinctly perceives an idea, then it must be true. With this in mind, in the

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Descartes: CSM, II, "Meditations," 24. AT, VII, 34.

*Principles*, Descartes does claim that the natural light has an intimate relationship to clear and distinct perceptions: “the light of nature...which God gave us can never encompass any object which is not true in so far as it is indeed encompassed by this faculty, that is, in so far as it is clearly and distinctly perceived.”<sup>75</sup> Thus, insofar as the natural light can only encompass true ideas, the power of the natural light involves revealing clear and distinct perceptions. Yet, upon closer inspection, Boyle’s argument that the natural light is a figurative description for the intellect ascertaining clear and distinct perceptions also has complications.

In her account, Boyle implies that any perception perceived by the mind clearly and distinctly is an experience of the natural light. Yet, the natural light is not associated with just *any* clear and distinct ideas. For example, Descartes claims that the basic principles of geometry and its elements—duration, order, and number—are clear and distinct.<sup>76</sup> But these clear and distinct perceptions are “formulated” and not “revealed” by the natural light.

When we see two stones, for example, and direct our attention not to their nature but merely to the fact that there are two of them, we *form* the idea of the number we call ‘two’; and when we later see two birds or two trees, and consider not their nature but merely the fact that there are two of them, we go back to the same idea as before. [...] In the same way, when we see a figure made up of three lines, we *form* an idea of it which we called the idea of a triangle....<sup>77</sup>

In apprehending numbers or shapes, and their properties, we “formulate” these ideas and know them clearly and distinctly. Descartes will later go on to claim that from these formulated clear and distinct perceptions, he can find and judge other clear and distinct principles in natural science.<sup>78</sup> Yet, nowhere does he claim any of these types of clear and distinct idea are revealed to

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<sup>75</sup> René Descartes, “Principles of Philosophy” in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume I*, translated and edited by John Cottingham et. al (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 203.

René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 13 Volumes, edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Cerf, 1897-1913), VIII A, 16.

<sup>76</sup> Descartes: CSM, I, “Principles of Philosophy,” 288. AT, VIII A, 326.

<sup>77</sup> Descartes: CSM, I, “Principles of Philosophy,” 212. AT, VIII A, 27.

<sup>78</sup> Descartes: CSM, I, “Principles of Philosophy,” 288. AT, VIII A, 326.

him by the natural light. Instead, Descartes will reserve the language of “revealing” for clear and distinct perceptions that are foundational in establishing and justifying his metaphysics, while utilizing the language of “formulating” for clear and distinct perceptions related to mathematics and scientific proofs.

In the *Meditations*, the meditator claims only six propositions—and only these propositions—are brought forward by way of the natural light.<sup>79</sup> What is noteworthy about these clear and distinct ideas is the role they play in the meditator’s project: each one of these ideas that is revealed by the natural light can be understood as foundational axioms (or exemplification of these axioms) in his meditation. As noted, the first revelation—the *Cogito*—is the first certain perception of all knowledge. The second—there must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in its effect—is foundational in Descartes’ proofs of God in the *Meditations*. The third revelation—ideas in the mind are like pictures or images, which are less perfect than the things they represent—reveals that ideas in the mind have no more reality than the entities they exemplify. The fourth revelation—the difference between preservation and creation is only a conceptual one—is used in Descartes’ argument that his existence depends upon God sustaining him. The fifth revelation—fraud and deception necessarily proceed from defect—is the foundational claim for the meditator’s theory of judgment, which also establishes that God is good. And finally, the sixth revelation—what is done cannot be undone—exemplifies an indubitable principle that is bestowed upon the meditator by God and not nature. Each one of these claims play a key role in establishing, exemplifying, focusing, or justifying the meditator’s project. Thus, while Boyle is correct in pointing out a relationship between the natural light and

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<sup>79</sup> See page 15 of this thesis.

clear and distinct ideas, the power of the natural light is reserved only for select perceptions that are revealed to the meditator.

The natural light's ability to reveal something to the meditator is distinctive. The natural light "tells," or "manifests," or "shows" the meditator that certain, foundational ideas are clear and distinct. Both Morris and Boyle attempt to address this feature of the natural light in terms of the distinction between the understanding and the will. Morris argued that the natural light was an operation of the understanding, while Boyle, correctly, claims the experience of the natural light involves the passive function of the mind, insofar as the mind perceives an idea, and allows for the proper use of the active function of the mind, insofar as the will affirms the veracity of this idea. However, both Morris and Boyle do not fully discuss the distinctive nature of how we experience the power of the natural light. Namely, the natural light appears to come from outside of the mind, or at least outside of a volitional mental act, to reveal essential metaphysical propositions to the meditator. For example, in a letter to Claude Clerselier, Descartes writes "that every deception depends on some defect is manifest to me by the natural light."<sup>80</sup> In this description, among others, the natural light seems to possess some sort of "autonomy" in both manifesting an axiom to the mind and directing the mind's attention.

James D. Collins in *Descartes' Philosophy of Nature* attempts, tersely, to account for this distinctive power of the natural light by suggesting that it is akin to a motivational drive that encourages the mind to seek truth. He begins arguing for this account by claiming that the 'Cartesian self' strives towards truth: "Our inner selfhood consists in a perduring effort toward making evidence more manifest, ordered, and comprehensive so that the perspicuous mind can assent and attain to the truth in an ever more adequate fashion."<sup>81</sup> The Cartesian self has an

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<sup>80</sup> Descartes: CSM, III, "To Clerselier, 23 April 1649," 378. AT, V, 357.

<sup>81</sup> James D. Collins, *Descartes' Philosophy of Nature* (Hoboken: Blackwell, 1971), 86.

inclination to manifest comprehensible and ordered truths. Collin claims the natural light is responsible for this inclination:

Descartes does not regard the natural light as an esoteric criterion or as a cover for unexamined dogmatisms. For it is the nuclear principle of intellectual integrity and growth in us all. It signifies our own best self, responsibly inclining us through its own implosion to submit our convictions to methodic criticism and a philosophical reconstruction leading to wisdom.<sup>82</sup>

The natural light is responsible for inclining the self to discover clear and certain truths about reality. This pursuit may “be weakened and diverted by sense prejudices and the pressures of utility and convention;”<sup>83</sup> however, since the natural light is the “nuclear principle” of intellectual growth that pushes the self to critically examine its beliefs in an attempt to reconstruct indubitable knowledge, the natural light “cannot be entirely quenched without destroying the self in its central act.”<sup>84</sup> The natural light, then, is different from, say, the understanding which passively formulates clear and distinct ideas as the light is akin to a motivational drive that is responsible for inclining the mind towards truth. The claims discovered by way of the natural light are those that can survive rigorous scrutiny, and hence why the meditator of the *Meditations* uses them as his foundational axioms in developing his project.

Collins’ brief account of the natural light highlights key aspects that were not discussed in Morris’ and Boyle’s commentaries.<sup>85</sup> First, Collins highlights the negative relationship between the natural light and convention. Descartes does claim that revelations discovered by way of the natural light can be blurred by prejudiced studies: “it is quite certain that [...] haphazard studies and obscure reflections blur the natural light and blind our intelligence.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> This is not to say that Morris or Boyle would disagree with all of the following characterizations.

<sup>86</sup> Descartes: CSM, I, “Rules for the Direction of the Mind,” 16. AT, X, 371.

Moreover, Descartes even goes as far to claim that the natural light is self-sufficient and does not need religion, philosophy, or logic to reveal clear and distinct ideas to a “good man:”

This light alone without any help from religion or philosophy determines what opinions a good man should hold on any matter that may occupy his thoughts, and penetrates into the secrets of the most recondite sciences.<sup>87</sup>

And:

[My argument has] been stated and worked but not by means of logic, or a rule or pattern of argument, but simply by the light of reason and good sense. When this light operates on its own, it is less liable to go wrong than when it anxiously strives to follow the numerous different rules, the inventions of human ingenuity and idleness, which serve more to corrupt it than render it more perfect.<sup>88</sup>

The natural light is all that is needed to uncover the “secrets of the most recondite sciences.” As a result, traditional religious, philosophical, and logical studies, or any other science invented by “human ingenuity” are not only unnecessary for the natural light, but in fact may blur its illumination. Additionally, Collins provides a plausible account for how the natural light is a distinctive power. By suggesting that the natural light is a motivational drive, and not necessarily a volitional mental act, this could explain why Descartes claims that the natural light *reveals* ideas to him and why he does not *formulate* them since this drive is the main factor in revealing certain truths. And since this drive inclines the mind to seek truth and scrutinize beliefs, the claims that are revealed by the natural light are those that are only perceived particularly clearly and distinctly.

However, while understanding the natural light as akin to a motivational drive that inclines the mind towards truth is plausible, it makes more sense to understand the natural light experientially. By suggesting that the natural light is a motivational drive, we lose appreciating

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<sup>87</sup> Descartes: CSM, II, “The Search for Truth,” 400. AT, X, 495.

<sup>88</sup> Descartes: CSM, II, “The Search for Truth,” 415. AT, X, 521.

Descartes' descriptive experience of the natural light and may blur some of its essential features.

Descartes gives a descriptive experience of the natural light: "a great light in the intellect was followed by a great inclination in the will...."<sup>89</sup> As previously mentioned, the experience of the natural light is twofold: a great light strikes the mind and the will follows this light.

Understanding the natural light as something like a disposition or a motivational drive fails to appreciate these instances of actual illumination. Descartes and his meditator are fascinated and gripped by the presence of the natural light and do their best to heed when it has struck them. In the "Objections and Replies" to the *Meditations*, Descartes claims that we must *attend* to the natural light: "For such a procedure made it much easier for me to free myself from my preconceived opinions, to *attend* to the light of nature, to ask myself questions, and to affirm with certainty that there can be nothing within me of which I am not in some way aware."<sup>90</sup>

When we experience the natural light, we must pay special attention to its presence. However, if we understand it as a drive for truth, we lose appreciating the instances when the light suddenly strikes us. But if we understand the natural light experientially, we ought to be concerned when the natural light occurs since the light striking us is a special moment that deserves great attention. As a result, Collin's account, while highlighting key aspects of the light and offering a novel take compared to Boyle and Morris, seems to miss something by understanding the natural light as a motivational drive and not as an experience.

Before continuing, let us take stock of our discussion thus far. We have discovered that the natural light is better understood as a privileged experience that occurs when a light strikes the mind and the will actively follows this light. When the will follows this light, the light reveals foundational axioms of Descartes' project. The natural light affects the mind in a distinct

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<sup>89</sup> Descartes: CSM, II, "Meditations," 41. AT, VII, 59.

<sup>90</sup> Descartes: CSM, II, "Objections and Replies," 77. AT, VII, 107.

way: the natural light *reveals* something to the understanding, which the will then affirms. This ‘revelation property’ of the light is important as Descartes explicitly claims that he can *formulate* other clear and distinct ideas, yet credits only the natural light for revealing foundational, clear and distinct ideas of metaphysics. That is, as previously mentioned, the natural light seems to possess some sort of “autonomy” in both manifesting foundational, metaphysical axioms to the mind and directing the mind’s attention, whereas when we formulate clear and distinct ideas, our minds are more active in explicitly seeking out these clear and distinct ideas. Hence, the natural light is not only primordial to Descartes’ project, but all other sciences and studies. In fact, Descartes claims that heeding and attending to the experience of the natural light is the only power required to arrive at truth. However, this experience of the natural light can either be obscured or denied. Descartes claims that haphazard studies or pre-conceived opinions make heeding the natural light difficult. As a result, if we wish to “embrace truth”<sup>91</sup> in a profound and primordial way, we need to attend to this experience of the light.

While we have not yet developed a precise account of the natural light, our account so far seems to run counter to Heidegger’s characterization of the *lumen naturale*. Heidegger suggested that the natural light is a casting light that illuminates entities so they can become objectified and calculable to the human intellect. However, we have discovered that the natural light appears to strike the mind outside a volitional mental act—something one would not expect to find given Heidegger’s characterization of Cartesian thinking as this thinking supposedly sets up and determines how things appear. Moreover, the meditator claims that the natural light “reveals,” “shows,” or “manifests” things to him. This is opposed to “declaring” or “ascertaining” a fact about an entity—rhetoric that would better fit with Heidegger’s characterization. And finally, the

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<sup>91</sup> Descartes: CSM, I, “Principles of Philosophy,” 205. AT, VIII A, 19. He states: “When we embrace the truth, our doing so voluntarily is much more to our credit than would be the case if we could not do otherwise.”

natural light appears to be something other than “representational thought.” In the *Meditations*, the meditator claims that by the natural light it is revealed to him that ideas in the mind are like pictures or images, which are less perfect than the things they represent. If we grant that ‘ideas being like pictures’ is what Heidegger has in mind when he claims that Cartesian thinking objectifies entities, then the natural light in some way appears outside of and more primordial than deliberative representation. This is because the natural light would reveal, on Heidegger’s account, representational thinking. Likewise, Heidegger claims that representational thinking is appropriative thinking, wherein a thinker sets up and dominates what appears. However, the natural light is something that happens *to* the meditator. That is, the natural light strikes us outside of a volitional act and a meditator must be receptive to this strike and follow it. Or put another way, a meditator cannot force the natural light to strike us and reveal truths to us.

However, these findings at the moment are preliminary. To illuminate the natural light essentially and determine whether Heidegger is correct in his characterization of Descartes, I suggest we pay heed to this experience by utilizing phenomenology. If we understand the natural light experientially, phenomenology will be the means of grasping the structures within this experience. I propose utilizing Heidegger’s own phenomenological understanding of thinking primarily developed in his course titled *What is Called Thinking?*. This is because in developing his phenomenological understanding of thinking, Heidegger discusses the ‘call of thinking’ as a light that strikes a thinker and directs him into the phenomenon of “being-thoughtful.” If we bracket Heidegger’s criticism of Descartes, we may find Heidegger’s own understanding of thinking can illuminate Descartes’ natural light.

### Chapter 3: The Great Lights of Thinking

In the previous chapter, I developed a preliminary account of the natural light. The natural light is a light that strikes the mind and, if followed, reveals foundational axioms of Descartes' metaphysics. Moreover, the natural light appears more primordial than thinking in terms of pictures and acts upon the mind outside of a volitional act. These findings seem to run counter to Heidegger's own characterization of the natural light in Descartes. However, we have not adequately grasped the natural light in its entirety. To develop a better account of the natural light, I suggested we illuminate it by way of phenomenology. The phenomenology of thinking developed by Heidegger in *What is Called Thinking?* is a worthwhile candidate for this task as Heidegger discusses the 'call of thinking' as a light that strikes a thinker and directs him into the phenomenon of "being-thoughtful." By cross-examining Descartes' natural light with Heidegger's 'call of thinking' and "being-thoughtful," we will develop an account of the natural light that is similar to Heidegger's own understanding of thinking.

Recalling our first chapter, Heidegger accuses Descartes of ushering in an era of thinking defined by deliberative representation, *viz.* Cartesian thinking. Cartesian thinking, Heidegger contends, has come to dominate our primary way for thinking about the world. Heidegger finds this problematic as this style of thinking glosses over thinking about the clearing of Being. And since "Thinking is thinking only when it *recalls* in thought εὐὐ [Being],"<sup>92</sup> Heidegger concludes that in our present day, the "most thought provoking in our thought-provoking time is that we are still not thinking."<sup>93</sup> However, *if* this is true, how are we to ever recall Being in thinking?

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<sup>92</sup> Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, 244.

<sup>93</sup> Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, 6.

Heidegger's remedy is to learn to think by repeating the thinking of the Greeks. To do this, we must get underway in the essential phenomenon that Herman E. Stark calls "being-thoughtful."<sup>94</sup>

Before elucidating "being-thoughtful," it is important to note that we cannot deliberately, that is volitionally or intentionally, get underway in this phenomenon, at least not in the sense that we do mathematics and physics deliberately. With mathematics, we can, provided we have some basic knowledge of mathematics, at any time without any outside influence, begin calculating numbers and performing mathematical operations. This is because mathematical thinking, or rather calculable thinking, is within a thinker's own power. A thinker does not need to appeal to something beyond herself to begin calculating mathematical operations such as '3 times 2' or '8 divided by 4.' She can raise these questions herself, solve them herself, and confirm a definite answer by herself. However, this is not the case with "being-thoughtful." Recalling the thinking of the Greeks, Heidegger claims that the Greeks were defined by their ability to "remain exposed"<sup>95</sup> to what existed, and their thinking was directed by the entities present to them. Greek thinkers, who were intimately connected with the phenomenon of "being-thoughtful," were directed into thinking by beings and their presence and did not define thinking by one's ability to perform calculable mental operations.

Accordingly, Heidegger claims that "thinking, *qua* thinking, is essentially a call."<sup>96</sup> The phenomenon of "being-thoughtful," begins when the presence of entities call us into thinking: "we truly incline [in thinking] only toward something that in turn inclines toward us...."<sup>97</sup> However, paying heed to this call is quite difficult as we generally cast it off.

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<sup>94</sup> Herman E. Stark, "A Thematic Unity for Heidegger's *Was heißt Denken?*," in *Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy* (Boston: Paideia, 1998), 3.

<sup>95</sup> Heidegger, "The Age," 131.

<sup>96</sup> Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, 161.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

Joyful things, too, and beautiful and mysterious and gracious things give us food for thought...if only we do not reject the gift by regarding everything that is joyful, beautiful, and gracious as the kind of thing which should be left to feeling and experience, and kept out of the winds of thought.<sup>98</sup>

When we are called into thinking—whether joyfully, beautifully, mysteriously, or graciously—we have a habit of rejecting its gift: we presume that this call “should be left to feeling and experience, and kept out of the winds of thought.” This is because, as previously mentioned, in Cartesian thinking, human beings limit the power of what *is* by whatever can be “dominated”<sup>99</sup> and set up. Hence, human beings can only apprehend entities that have been set up. Yet, as previously discussed, the presence of entities, as “that which arises and opens itself,” is not thought about in thinking. Accordingly, when we are called into thinking we relegate this call to a mere “feeling” since we cannot comprehend it *via* “thinking” since we have not set it up. Thus, since thinking qua thinking is essentially an incalculable call and since we are prone to only think about entities that we have dominated, we are faced with a serious problem as to how we enter the call of thinking when we are predisposed to be oblivious to it.

Fortunately, Heidegger provides a solution to this problem. He claims that we will be guided into “being-thoughtful” by a light:

When we attempt to learn what is called thinking and what calls for thinking, are we not getting lost in the reflection that thinks on thinking? *Yet all along our way a steady light is cast on thinking.* This light, however, is not introduced by the lamp of reflection. *It issues from thinking itself, and only from there.*<sup>100</sup>

According to Heidegger, a thinker is directed towards thinking qua thinking by a light. That is, we perceive the call of thinking as a light. Thus, for us to avoid becoming lost in “reflectively

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>99</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 117.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 28. Emphasis added.

thinking” about thinking, that is thinking representationally about thinking, we must pay attention and heed the light of thinking when it strikes us.

However, merely paying attention to the light of thinking does not grant us entrance into “being-thoughtful” by itself. Rather, Heidegger claims we must be receptive to the light in such a way that we actively ‘take it up’: “[W]hat is perceived concerns us in such a way that we take it up specifically and do something with it. [...] [In other words,] we take it to heart. What is taken to heart, however, is left to be exactly as it is.”<sup>101</sup> When the light of thinking strikes us, we must actively “take it up specifically and do something with it.” When we take the light of thinking to heart, Being “is left to be exactly as it is,” and laid before us. Hence, to be granted access into “being-thoughtful,” we must actively take to heart the light of thinking as to allow Being to lay before us.

Before we continue discussing the phenomenon of “being-thoughtful,” it is important to note the similarities between Descartes and Heidegger thus far. For Heidegger, for us to think like the Greeks, we must be called into thinking. We heed this call of thinking by following the light radiating from it. Additionally, this light of thinking is opposed to “reflective thinking,” which ignores or mars the call of thinking by treating thinking itself like an object. However, for Heidegger, simply being struck by the light of thinking does not grant one access to the phenomenon of “being-thoughtful.” Rather, we must actively “take up” this light as to allow Being to lay before us. Similarly, for Descartes, there is a privileged and most trustworthy mode of thinking spurred on by the natural light. This experience of thinking begins when a great light strikes the intellect. This experience is contrasted to thinking that “follows numerous different rules,” like logic, religion, and science, as these studies “serve more to corrupt [the natural light]

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 203.

than render it more perfect.”<sup>102</sup> Interestingly for Descartes as well, it is not enough just to be struck by the natural light. Rather, we must actively follow it with our wills as to embrace what the natural light reveals to us. Hence, both Descartes and Heidegger recognize a privileged mode of thinking that is opposed to ‘reflective’ or ‘rule-following’ styles of thinking. This privileged mode of thinking calls upon us, the thinkers, when it issues a light that strikes us.<sup>103</sup> Yet, the light striking us is not enough for this experience to be worthwhile. Rather, we must actively follow the light of thinking by taking it to heart for this experience to reveal anything to us, the thinkers. While these findings are preliminary, let us continue elucidating Heidegger’s “being-thoughtful” to see if what is revealed in this phenomenon is similar to what is revealed to Descartes by way of the natural light.

For Heidegger, once we actively take up the light of thinking, we are granted access to “being-thoughtful.” The phenomenon of “being-thoughtful” allows us to dwell in the primordial opening where Being and thinking can presence to each other:

The opening grants first of all the possibility of the path to presence, and grants the possible presencing of that presence itself. We must think *aletheia*, unconcealment, as the opening which first grants Being and thinking and their presencing to and for each other.<sup>104</sup>

When we follow the light of thinking and take it up, the clearing of Being is unconcealed. When the clearing of Being is unconcealed, Being appears to thinking. That is, Being itself is no longer marred or obscured such that it can be ignored. Accordingly, “Being and thinking and their presencing to and for each other” can finally occur. It is in this occurrence that we experience

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<sup>102</sup> Descartes: CSM, II, “The Search for Truth,” 415. AT, X, 521.

<sup>103</sup> When the light strikes us, Descartes and Heidegger will provide different accounts for how we process it. For Descartes, the light will strike the *Cogito*, where the intellect perceives it and the will actively follows it. For Heidegger, the light will gather in the “inmost mind, the heart, the heart’s core,” where we can actively take the light to heart.

<sup>104</sup> Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy,” 68.

“being-thoughtful,” which is where we can finally think qua thinking and recall in thinking Being. The unconcealment of Being that allows Being to appear to thinking and thinking to be appropriated by Being Heidegger calls *aletheia*.

Heidegger claims in “being-thoughtful” we come to understand that thinking “is only thinking to the extent to which it remains dependent and focused on...Being.”<sup>105</sup> In fact, Heidegger claims that Parmenides, one of the first thinkers who dwelled in “being-thoughtful,” was the first to claim that “For it is the same thing to think and to be.”<sup>106</sup> Thinking and Being are the same, but not the sense that they are identical, but rather in that they belong together. To think essentially is to think about Being, that is, thinking itself depends upon and is focused on presence. This discovery by Parmenides “becomes the basic theme of all of Western-European thinking.”<sup>107</sup> This theme, while varied, for Heidegger becomes the marker for thinking qua thinking in the history of philosophy.

With this in view, Heidegger claims that Descartes “does not ask about Being as Being, that is, does not raise the question how there can be presence as such.”<sup>108</sup> According to Heidegger, Descartes is not concerned with presence itself and takes beings for granted and uses his intellect to dominate them. Hence, on Heidegger’s account, Descartes could never appreciate or come close to discovering the claim that Parmenides does, namely that “For it is the same thing to think and to be.” That is, through Cartesian thinking we are supposedly not able to have the thought that thinking is only thinking if it is dependent and focused on Being.

Yet, Descartes’ meditator raises the question how there can be presence as such in the “Third Meditation” and discovers by way of the natural light that he can only think in virtue of

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<sup>105</sup> Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, 240.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>108</sup> Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy,” 71.

God's presence sustaining him. At the beginning of the "Third Meditation," the meditator discovers that he has several ideas and thoughts, but has not yet "clearly perceived their true origin."<sup>109</sup> One such idea is God. As previously mentioned, utilizing the revelation by way of the natural light that "there must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in its effect," the meditator claims that since the idea of God is infinite, and since he, the meditator, is finite, the idea of God must have been stamped upon him by a Creator as he does not have the requisite infinity to produce the idea of God himself.<sup>110</sup> With this discovery, the meditator goes one step further and inquires whether he could be the origin of himself without this idea of God: "I should...like to go further and inquire whether I myself, who has this idea [of God], could exist if no such being existed."<sup>111</sup> Descartes' meditator is inquiring how his being, and thus his thinking, is possible at all. The meditator finds, following the aforementioned revelation of the natural light, that his being must depend upon God:

[W]hen I turn my mind's eye upon myself, I understand that I am a thing which is incomplete and dependent on another and which aspires without limit to ever greater and better things; but I also understand that he on whom I depend...is God. The whole force of the argument lies in this: I recognize that it would be impossible for me to exist with the kind of nature I have – that is, having within me the idea of God—were it not the case that God really existed. By 'God' I mean the very being the idea of whom is within me, that is the possessor of all the perfections which I cannot grasp, but can somehow reach in my thought....<sup>112</sup>

Descartes' meditator recognizes that his being and thus his ability to think depends on a greater being sustaining him. This being is God. God cannot fully be grasped by the meditator, yet God can somehow reach his thinking. The ability for Descartes' meditator to come to the revelation that his being and thinking are dependent upon God is by way of the natural light. Admittedly,

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<sup>109</sup> Descartes: CSM, II, "Meditations," 28. AT, VII, 38.

<sup>110</sup> See Descartes: CSM, II, "Meditations," 29-31. AT, VII, 40-45.

<sup>111</sup> Descartes: CSM, II, "Meditations," 33. AT, VII, 48.

<sup>112</sup> Descartes: CSM, II, "Meditations," 35. AT, VII, 52.

God is an entity and not Being itself. However, according to Heidegger, God is represented as the Being of beings: “The Being of beings is represented fundamentally, in the sense of the ground, only as *causa sui*. This is the metaphysical concept of God.”<sup>113</sup> While Heidegger does find this problematic in fully apprehending the Being of beings, God in Descartes’ system is nonetheless the most Being-like aspect of his project. Also, Descartes’ natural light is structurally similar to Heidegger’s light of thinking: Descartes’ natural light leads a thinker to the presence of God, the represented Being of beings, while Heidegger’s light of thinking leads a thinker into the clearing of Being where thinking and Being presence to each other. Thus, Descartes also discovers through the experience of the natural light that thinking and Being belong together, albeit in a different sense than Parmenides as Descartes reaches this conclusion by way of God. Nonetheless, what is revealed by Heidegger’s “being-thoughtful” and Descartes’ natural light is a fundamental relation between thinking and Being that Heidegger thinks is at the heart of all Western philosophy.

Thus, the experience of the natural light does not fit into Heidegger’s characterization of Cartesian thinking as deliberative representation. As previously mentioned, in the *Meditations*, the meditator claims that by the natural light it is revealed to him that ideas in the mind are like pictures or images, which are less perfect than the things they represent. As previously mentioned, if we grant that ‘ideas are like pictures’ is what Heidegger has in mind when he claims that Cartesian thinking objectifies entities, then the natural light in some way appears as outside of and more primordial than representational thinking. And this is quite evident based on how Descartes describes the experience of the natural light. The meditator in Descartes’ *Meditations* describes the natural light as something that happens *to* him, namely, as a great light

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<sup>113</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, translated by Joan Stambaugh, (New York: HarperCollins Publishing, 1969), 60.

striking his mind. When the light strikes him and he follows it with his will, the *lumen naturale* “manifests,” or “tells,” or “shows” the meditator foundational, clear and distinct perceptions. Hence, the meditator *must* be receptive to the *presence* of the natural light. Thus, the *presence* of the natural light calls the thinker into a privileged mode of thinking. As a result, the natural light is not a concept or idea that is formulated by the meditator and hence not at the meditator’s disposal. Therefore, though, Descartes does not discuss the “the question how there can be presence as such” as explicitly as Parmenides, he does nonetheless heed the call of thinking, and thus must, in some way, heed the call of Being, in virtue of being over taken by the *presence* of the natural light.

But is this possible? Can one both heed the call of thinking, and hence the call of Being, and yet still think representationally? That is, can one think like a Greek *and* objectify entities, or is it impossible for one thinker to think in both styles?

In fact, not only is it possible, but Heidegger claims Immanuel Kant does exactly this.

What Kant calls synthetic judgments *a priori* is the modern interpretation of the *χρή τὸ λέγειν τε νοεῖν τ’ ἐὸν ἕμμεναι* [“For it is the same thing to think and to be”]. In that proposition, Kant tells us that, and how, thinking—the forming of ideas concerning the Being of empirical beings—belongs together with the Being of beings.<sup>114</sup>

When Kant claims that the possibilities of experience are at the same time the conditions of the possibility of the objects of experience, he identifies that thinking (the possibility of experience) and Being (the possibility of the objects of experience) belong together.<sup>115</sup> That is, though quite differently from Parmenides, Kant’s “thinking moves nonetheless in the same (not the identical) sphere as the thinking of the Greek thinkers.”<sup>116</sup> Thus, while “Parmenides’ statement cannot,

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<sup>114</sup> Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, 243

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

therefore, be interpreted in Kant's terms"<sup>117</sup> because Kant sees Being as the objectivity of an object, which is ultimately an objectified form of thinking about Being, we can nonetheless see that Kant's thinking, at some level, moves in the same way as Parmenides'. Therefore, Kant has been 'in the current of thinking,' though he ultimately transposed this current in representational terms.

This conclusion easily follows for Descartes too. Descartes' meditator claims that his ability to think, his origin, depends on God. That is, thinking and Being belong together by virtue of God granting and guaranteeing this belonging together. Therefore, just as Kant's "thinking moves nonetheless in the same (not the identical) sphere as the thinking of the Greek thinkers," so too does Descartes' at some level.

Let us take stock of our findings. For Descartes, the experience of the natural light begins by being receptive to a great light striking the intellect. However, paying heed to this light is difficult as logical, religious, and philosophical studies "serve more to corrupt [the natural light] than render it more perfect." Yet, if we actively follow this natural light with our wills, we access a special mode of meditation where the foundational, clear and distinct perceptions to all of metaphysics are revealed to us. These revelations manifest, among other things, that a meditator's being and thinking can only exist in virtue of his dependence upon God. Through Heidegger's phenomenology of thinking, we can plausibly disclose the essential structures behind Descartes' experience of the natural light. To start, the natural light for Descartes is like the call of thinking for Heidegger as we recognize the call of thinking by the light that radiates from it. The reason why 'reflective' or 'rule-following' styles of thinking serve to corrupt the natural light is because the light of thinking, which issues from Being, cannot be dominated.

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

Thus, if we wish to heed the light of thinking, we must remain exposed and be receptive to it in a non-appropriative manner. However, being receptive to the natural light is not enough for this experience to be worthwhile. Rather, Descartes claims we must actively follow the natural light with our wills. This is because, according to Heidegger, we must take the light of thinking to heart as to allow Being to lay before us in the clearing of Being. Once Being is laid before us, we discover that thinking and Being belong together. For Descartes, this is manifested by the natural light in the “Third Meditation” when it is discovered that his meditator’s existence and his ability to think depends upon God: God is the represented form of Being as beings that guarantees that Being and thinking belong together. This revelation can be understood as a variation of Parmenides’ proclamation that ‘thinking and Being belong together,’ which is the theme at the heart of all Western philosophy.

With our account of the natural light complete after likening Heidegger’s ‘call of thinking’ and “being-thoughtful” to Descartes’ *lumen naturale*, we are now in a place to conclude this thesis by appraising Heidegger’s understanding of the *lumen naturale* and his characterization of Cartesian thinking.

## Chapter 4: Concluding Remarks

In the previous chapter, I discovered that Heidegger's understanding of thinking helped illuminate Descartes' natural light. The natural light, like Heidegger's 'call of thinking,' directs a thinker into a privileged meditation where thinking and Being presence to each other, in the sense that the natural light reveals God. In this experience where thinking and Being presence to each other, a thinker discovers that Being and thinking belong together. With our account of the natural light complete, I will conclude this thesis by appraising Heidegger's understanding of the *lumen naturale* and his characterization of Cartesian thinking. This appraisal will yield that Heidegger is uncharitable in his characterizations of the *lumen naturale* and Cartesian thinking.

Beginning with Heidegger's take on the *lumen naturale*, we find that he brushes the natural light off too quickly with reference to Descartes. As previously mentioned, Heidegger dismisses that the *lumen naturale*, Descartes' most trustworthy power for discovering truth, can illuminate the clearing of Being:

Philosophy does speak about the light of reason, but does not heed the opening of Being. The *lumen naturale*, the light of reason, throws light only on openness [*das Offene*, the Open, what is open]. It does concern the opening, but so little does it form it that it needs it in order to be able to illuminate what is present in the opening [*die Lichtung*, the clearing].<sup>118</sup>

As previously stated, Heidegger claims the natural light does not heed the opening of Being. It is partially concerned with the opening or clearing of Being, insofar as this clearing allows humans to think about entities, but the natural light only illuminates the entities present in the opening and does not concern itself with the opening of Being itself. The first problem with this understanding of the natural light is that Heidegger views the natural light as a 'casting' light as opposed to a 'calling' light. That is, Heidegger views the natural light as a light that projects

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<sup>118</sup> Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy," 66.

from our minds onto entities. Once we cast this light onto an entity, our minds can then objectify and calculate the qualities of this entity. However, as has been shown, the natural light is something that happens *to* the meditator. The meditator does not have deliberate control over the natural light. Rather, the natural light calls the thinker into a privileged mode of meditation, where foundational principles of metaphysics are revealed. Second, Heidegger's understanding that the natural light is only preoccupied with entities is unfair. Admittedly, the natural light does reveal God, which is an entity. However, God is the most Being-like aspect of Descartes system and Heidegger concedes that God is the represented form of the Being of beings. Moreover, by way of the natural light, Descartes' meditator claims that his thinking is dependent upon God. Thus, thinking and Being belong together by virtue of God granting and guaranteeing this belonging together. Therefore, the natural light does concern Being itself as it radiates from and calls us into the primordial clearing where Being and thinking presence to each other, albeit in such a way that Descartes' meditator understands this in a truncated sense according to Heidegger.

This finding directly impacts Heidegger's characterization of Cartesian thinking. Heidegger characterizes Cartesian thinking as deliberative representation. As previously mentioned, Cartesian thinking as deliberative representation can be defined as the human objectification of entities into calculable, mental objects. In objectifying any entity into a calculable representation, human beings are represented and justified as the 'demarcators' of truth, *viz.* the subject. When this happens, Being's presences withdraws into the "invisible shadow" all around Cartesian thinking. However, given our take on the natural light this account is not accurate. Descartes and his meditator in virtue of heeding the natural light are led to the presence of God, the most Being-like aspect of Descartes' project. And while admittedly God is

a represented form of Being according to Heidegger, this should not take away from the fact that—structurally speaking—the natural light leads Descartes in the same direction as Heidegger’s light of thinking insofar as it leads to Being. Moreover, in heeding the natural light, Descartes and his meditator do not always set up and demarcate what is true. Rather, the meditator must be receptive to the presence of the natural light and, in fact, Descartes explicitly claims that ‘rule-following’ styles of thinking, like logic, math, and science, corrupt the natural light. Furthermore, the meditator does not always delimit the power of what *is* so he may secure truth for himself. In fact, it is the experience and the power of the natural light that reveals the most important truths to Descartes’ whole project. As a result, Heidegger is too hasty in his judgment of Cartesian thinking. The experience of the natural light does reveal a fundamental relation between thinking and Being that Heidegger thinks is at the heart of all Western philosophy.

With our argument complete, it is important to acknowledge an omission in our discussion. In providing the phenomenological account for the natural light by way of Heidegger’s ‘call of thinking’ and “being-thoughtful,” I did not explicitly discuss nor explain why the natural light is indubitable and the most trustworthy experience in Cartesian thinking. This discussion is unfortunately outside of the scope of this thesis.<sup>119</sup> However, given our understanding of the natural light we can at least suggest why Descartes and his meditator do not call into doubt the perceptions revealed by the natural light. I argued that the experience of the natural light could lead Descartes and his meditator into the clearing of Being where thinking and Being presence to each other, that is, into the phenomenon of “being-thoughtful.” The unconcealment of Being that allows us to ‘be-thoughtful’ Heidegger calls *aletheia*. It is in the

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<sup>119</sup> This conversation is inherently difficult since Heidegger’s and Descartes’ understanding of “truth” are not easily reconcilable.

clearing of Being that Heidegger claims that “traits of presence...find expression.”<sup>120</sup> The ‘traits of presence’—such as unconcealedness, gathering, duration—are the terms that the Greeks used to think about what is present. That is, the ‘traits of presence’ are fundamental features of Being that subsequent Greek thinking used to think about entities in the world. Heidegger claims that the Greeks never gave thought to these “traits of presence” as they were not “problematic, or questionable.”<sup>121</sup> As a result, it is a small—but undefended and contentious—leap to claim that Descartes also discovered ‘traits of presence’ in the clearing where Being and thinking presence to each other. These ‘traits of presence’ are what are revealed to him by the natural light. Admittedly, while what is revealed by the natural light is not identical to the ‘traits of presence’ of the Greeks, Descartes’ traits, insofar as they reveal God’s presence, still constitute the fundamental character of presence. And because the ‘traits of presence’ are unquestionable, Descartes, in his quest for indubitable knowledge, conferred “certainty” to the traits revealed by the natural light. This could thus explain why what is revealed by the natural light cannot be subject to doubt, however problematic Heidegger may find the traits of presence in apprehending Being in its entirety. However, defending this leap will be for another time.

Therefore, in closing, we have found that Heidegger’s understanding of Descartes and the *lumen naturale* are uncharitable. Heidegger viewed Descartes as a thinker who reduced Being to a representation in a way that ignored the presencing of Being itself. From this understanding of Descartes, Heidegger dismisses the claim that the *lumen naturale* directly heeds the opening of Being itself. Rather, according to him, the natural light heeds only the beings that presence within the opening. However, this appeared as a presumptive take on Heidegger’s behalf as

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 238. It is important to note that Heidegger does not find the unquestionability of the traits of presence a positive thing. He claims that the traits of presence set the groundwork for subsequent thinking to ignore the presence of Being.

Descartes never fully defined the power of the natural light. To better determine the accuracy of Heidegger's account we reviewed Descartes' philosophy and three of his commentators—Morris, Boyle, and Collins—on the power of the natural light. While these accounts revealed essential characteristics of the natural light, none of these accounts were without complication. Accordingly, to illuminate the natural light essentially and appraise Heidegger's characterization of Descartes, I suggested we pay heed to this experience by utilizing phenomenology. I proposed utilizing Heidegger's own phenomenological understanding of thinking primarily develop in his course titled *What is Called Thinking?*. This is because in developing his phenomenological understanding of thinking, Heidegger too discusses a light that calls him into thinking. By comparing and connecting the two thinkers, Heidegger's 'call of thinking' and "being-thoughtful" plausibly disclosed the essential structures behind the experience of Descartes' natural light. Our most important finding when illuminating the natural light through Heidegger's phenomenology was that the natural light calls us into an experience where Being and thinking presence to each other, in the sense that the natural light leads to God, the most Being-like aspect of Descartes' project. As a result, we find that Cartesian thinking can and does heed Being. In turn, Heidegger's understanding of the *lumen naturale* and Descartes' philosophy are uncharitable.

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