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Keywords: Kierkegaard; Descartes; creation; faith; reason

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Between Kierkegaard and Descartes: faith, reason, and the ontology of creation

Avron Kulak¹

Abstract

In this essay I pose the question of the relationship between faith and reason by examining central texts of Kierkegaard and Descartes. I focus particularly on the relationship of the Genesis story creation – its ontology and ethics – to Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* and Descartes’ *Meditations* and *Discourse on Method* in order to examine the history and ethics that underpin the latter three texts. I argue that, in aligning their projects with biblical principles and values, and in also distinguishing their work from the principles and values underpinning ancient Greek thought, Kierkegaard and Descartes together teach us that existence cannot be divided between faith and reason, that existence is religious or philosophical, faithful or rational, only if it is both simultaneously.

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In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard invokes three personages as comprising the greatest challenge to modern philosophers: God, Abraham – and Descartes. Kierkegaard in fact opens his text with the claim that, unlike modern philosophers, Descartes was willing to undertake the enormous task of doubting everything, which was possible, Kierkegaard holds, only because, like Abraham, Descartes did not doubt with respect to faith. What, however, are we to make of Kierkegaard’s aligning Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, with Abraham, the father of faith, especially given the insistence in *Fear and Trembling* that faith begins where thought stops? In what might amount to a surprising reversal of roles, Descartes writes in the *Meditations* that “The whole force” of my argument for God’s necessary existence “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,”² while it is Kierkegaard who responds to Descartes by reminding him, in *Works of Love*, that “All human speech, even the divine speech of Holy Scripture, about the spiritual is essentially metaphorical speech.”³ Are the single individual and the doubter presented to us by Kierkegaard and Descartes, then, faithful or rational, religious or philosophical? Which, in fact, is which? In this study I shall argue that, in showing that the being to whom we must attribute necessary existence is no less human than divine, the texts of Kierkegaard and Descartes teach us that faith and reason are dialogically interconnected – that faith has a self-critical rationality and reason a faithful core – insofar as each involves the confrontation with or call from God, the demands of being created

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²Descartes, *Meditations*, 55.

³Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 209.

in the image of God, and, therefore, the ontology of creation from nothing.

What, then, does it mean to confront or to be called by the God of creation? In Genesis 1.3 we are told that, on the first day of creation, God brings light into existence and separates it from darkness. Yet, it is not until Genesis 1.14, the fourth day of creation, that God creates the sun, moon, and stars to separate day from night. How, then, are we to comprehend the light that first makes its appearance in Genesis? What is meant by the separation of light from darkness when the light with which Genesis begins does not have its source in nature and when, as a result, we are, here, in the beginning – as Kierkegaard would remind us – clearly within the realm of metaphor? The natural realm predates by eons the coming into existence of the God of creation, the Genesis account of whom scholars date to the sixth century B.C.E. In indicating, then, at the very opening of Genesis that the light by which creation is primordially or fundamentally illuminated, and thus the light by which we primordially or fundamentally see, is not given naturally – the light with which Genesis opens expresses, or is the very content of, the mind of God – the biblical authors ultimately reconstitute, or ask their readers to reconstitute, the relationship between nature and God’s creation; they indicate that to confront God is to be accountable for articulating a conception of beginning that, while belated in regard to nature, is nevertheless conceived as prior to, as having priority over, our natural beginning: creation is the beginning that God and, therefore, we give to ourselves. In regard, then, to the meaning of the separation of light and darkness in Genesis 1.3, it must be remembered that the first creation story in Genesis, which culminates with human beings being created in the image and likeness of God, is followed by a second creation story in which it is God who declares that human beings bear the likeness and image of God in knowing good and evil. To confront the God of creation is to learn, therefore, that the light of the mind of God is the light of the mind of the human, that existence becomes the gift that we give ourselves when we learn that the light that illuminates it, the light by which we see, the light with which we begin, is moral.

It is thus striking that when Descartes opens his *Meditations* he finds, as Abraham does, that it is the very existence of God that renders faith in human existence an ordeal. That is, when Descartes undertakes the task of doubting everything that can possibly be doubted he is clear that what requires him to do so is his having to confront what he calls his “preconceived belief”⁴ in the omnipotence of God as creator. For, he writes, if I have been made the creature that I am by a God who is omnipotent, then such a God would have the power to bring it about that nothing is as I imagine or sense it to be, the power to create me such that I am deceived all of the time. Yet, Descartes points out, even were God in fact to be a malicious deceiver, God could “never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is conceived by me...”⁵ Further, Descartes writes, whenever I turn to what I clearly perceive as being necessarily true, “I spontaneously declare: let whoever can do so deceive me, he will never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I continue to think that I am something; or make it true at some future time that I have never existed, since it is now true that I exist.”⁶ As Descartes writes in the *Discourse on Method*, while his search for truth demanded that he confront the possibility that everything he thought

⁴Descartes, *Meditations*, 25.

⁵Descartes, *Meditations*, 17.

⁶Descartes, *Meditations*, 25.

was false, it was *necessary* – and I emphasize “necessary” – “that I, who was thinking this, was something. And observing that this truth” – I think, therefore I am – “was so firm and sure” that even the actions of a malevolent God “were incapable of shaking it, I decided that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.”⁷

Descartes had opened the *Meditations* by indicating that the very benefit of his method of doubt is to lead away from preconceived opinions all those who were willing to engage that method. In beginning, then, with his preconceived notion of God’s omnipotence as bringing into doubt everything that can possibly be doubted, Descartes finds that he must relinquish, utterly refine and redefine, his (and our) preconception of omnipotence: God’s power, God’s omnipotence, is limited, for not even God has the power to make the doubter believe that he (in Descartes’ case) does not exist, not even God has the power to reverse, at some future time, the creation of the doubter. That is, in helping his readers to distinguish between, on the one hand, finite power as the greater or lesser strength of one person in relation to another – leading to the contradictory dominion of one or some over others – and, on the other hand, omnipotence or infinite power as that which is limited to and by the existence of the other, what Descartes finds in doubting everything is that the one thing that cannot be doubted is the existence of the doubter: the doubter necessarily exists.

Yet, who is the doubter whose existence limits and is thus paradoxically guaranteed by the power of God, the doubter who establishes properly the relationship between “I think” and “I am,” between thought and existence? What does the doubter think? What does Descartes mean by existence?

In responding to the above questions it is critical to note that when Descartes opens the *Discourse on Method* he invokes the ontology and ethics of creation from nothing – that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, knowing good and evil: Descartes is clear that reason, which, he holds, is the capacity to distinguish between the true and the false, is both equal in all and whole in all. For, as he insists in the *Meditations*, while the body is divisible, the mind is not: it is impossible, he writes, to “conceive of half a mind.”⁸ While Descartes does not directly provide the content of the doubter’s thought and existence, other than to say that he finds in his mind the idea of the perfect, a claim to which I shall return later, and while he does not, here, at the beginning of the *Discourse*, explicitly provide the content of what he considers to be true and what he considers to be false, if we are willing to read the text in light of its own claims – willing to bind together the text’s discrete claims – then it becomes clear that what he considers to be true is expressed precisely in the presuppositions with which he begins, in the ideas that all human beings are whole and that reason is shared equally among all – that reason is the idea and holds as true that all are whole and equal. Yet, if reason is equal in all, then the “I” of the *cogito* is, it turns out, no less universal than individual: I think – the equality and wholeness of all – therefore I am; I think – the necessary existence of all – therefore I am. The *cogito*, in other words, is a concept of relationship.

The existence, then, that is named in the *cogito* and that is shared by or, more accurately, granted to all as necessary is not the existence that all are given naturally, for its necessity has emerged only after having undergone the ordeal of doubt. As Descartes writes in the *Meditations*, “I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely

⁷Descartes, *Discourse*, 127.

⁸Descartes, *Meditations*, 9.

and start again right from the foundations,”⁹ foundations that are not naturally given to, but created by, both God and the doubter. It is this second, belated beginning, this beginning in which the doubter begins conscious of beginning, that Descartes calls existence. I think – the self as a self-conscious project – therefore I am. I think – existence not as that with which I am born but as that whose foundational necessity I must grant to myself and others – therefore I am.

Further, Descartes is clear in the *Discourse* that the foundation from which we must start anew requires us to distinguish between the senses and imagination, on the one hand, and reason, on the other hand, a distinction that has radical implications for our conception of the human and of human causality. Descartes writes that when people are unable to comprehend the existence of the soul and God it is because they do not lift their minds above the finite objects that can be perceived through the senses and the images of the finite that are then generated by the mind. The result, he holds, is that what is unimaginable becomes, for them, unintelligible. But God and the soul, Descartes insists, are clear and distinct ideas belonging not to the senses and imagination but to reason. In thus demonstrating, although not explicitly claiming, that the mind, which is both whole and indivisible, is independent of the finite, Descartes shows his readers that the foundations upon which the mind – upon which the relationship between thought and existence – rests and by which it constitutes itself are not natural or finite but infinite. To begin once in the course of one’s life to create proper foundations is thus to learn that causality is not restricted to that which is prior in time: it is to learn that we begin – must begin – from nothing finite, from precisely the ideas of the equality and necessary existence of all, in light of which existence becomes the test of one’s wholeness. Embedded in the *cogito*, then, between thought and existence, both joining them and allowing each its independence, thus making their relationship a task – the task of a lifetime, Kierkegaard would say – is the will, whose infinitude Descartes invokes in his fourth *Meditation* when he writes that it “is not restricted in any way” and is “so great that the possibility of a further increase in its perfection or greatness is beyond my understanding,” with the result that “it is in virtue of the will that I understand myself to bear in some way the image and likeness of God.”¹⁰ It is because there are no images of the mind – when images are associated with sensory perception – that the mind’s only proper image is God’s omnipotence as the knowledge of good and evil.

Is it, then, because Descartes views the subject who is prompted to call everything into doubt by the idea of God’s omnipotence as the one who, created in the image of God, ultimately wills to begin not with finite but with the idea of all human beings as infinite – as whole, as equal, as existing necessarily – that Johannes de Silentio, the pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling*, makes him the standard of and problem for modern day philosophers? In responding to this question, and also in elucidating what, for de Silentio, comprises faith, it is vital to recall that he insists that faith is for this life and never for a life to come. He thus conceives the God of Abraham not as other-worldly but as the guarantor of this life who calls Abraham to appropriate the structure of dualistic opposition that inheres in each of, and also between, what he calls the esthetic as the first immediacy and the ethical as universal and teleological. For de Silentio, to be called by God is to learn that, just as Isaac was originally a gift of God, given to Abraham at one hundred years of age, Abraham can continue to have Isaac only on the basis, only as a

⁹Descartes, *Meditations*, 12.

¹⁰Descartes, *Meditations*, 40.

gift, of God. The gift, however, in involving the distinctions among esthetics, ethics, and faith, again presupposes or bespeaks the difference between finite and infinite power, the latter of which de Silentio expresses when he indicates, together with his critique of universality, that faith is equally individual and universal – that faith is a marvel from which no one is excluded (that faith is a marvel because it means that no one is to be excluded).

De Silentio defines the ethical as the annulment of the individual in light of a universal *telos* by which the individual is absorbed: the ethical is the sacrifice of the individual to the universal, the sacrifice of the self to the other. He then defines the esthetic as the spontaneous response to the immediacies of feeling and mood that ultimately becomes the demonic: the esthetic is the sacrifice of the universal to the individual, the sacrifice of the other to the self. Together, then, the ethical and the esthetic render the existence of self and other unnecessary. Further, de Silentio is clear that, as the universal, “the ethical is also the divine.” He insists, however, that, when the divine is conceived merely as our ethical *telos*, God becomes “an impotent thought,” the “invisible vanishing point” of existence, a total abstraction with which we never enter into relation.¹¹ The ethical, when conceived as teleological, thus renders not only human but also divine existence unnecessary.

How, then, is the reader to comprehend that what de Silentio calls faith requires the sacrifice of Isaac? Does faith, does the God of Abraham, render the existence of Isaac unnecessary? De Silentio is clear that, just as the categories of first immediacy and first interiority that he associates with the esthetic are regained in faith – they become the later immediacy and the new interiority of faith – the suspension of the ethical *telos* that contradicts existence, both human and divine, does not invalidate but transforms ethics. In faith, he writes, “the ethical receives a completely different expression, a paradoxical expression”¹² that brings the individual to express love of neighbor in a way that is opposite to that which is considered duty in terms of ethics as teleology. De Silentio then proffers, as a radical paradigm of the paradoxical, faithful expression of ethics that can make love seem its opposite the demand made by Jesus that we must hate both self and other in order to be his disciples. In what way, however, does Jesus’ formulation of discipleship comprise a paradoxical, rather than a contradictory, ethics, one that is consistent with the faithful regaining of existence, both divine and human, as necessary?

In adducing Jesus’ parabolic formulation of discipleship within the context of explicating the sacrifice of Isaac, de Silentio indicates that it is precisely in regard to Jesus’ paradigm of ethics that his own concept of absolute duty to God – and thus his treatment of the story of Abraham and Isaac – is to be comprehended. But how does what Jesus call hatred – of *both* self and other – place us in a faithful relationship to God and human beings, especially since, as de Silentio makes clear, the knight of faith can never be led to stop loving? For de Silentio, to hate (to annul or sacrifice) only the self is precisely to express the ethical as one’s external *telos* (as contradictory, not paradoxical); to hate (to annul or sacrifice) only the other would be to express the mere immediacy of the esthetic (the first, not the new, interiority). But to hate both self and other in the sense demanded by Jesus is, as de Silentio indicates, to love both faithfully – to regain self and other in the absolute relation to the absolute as that which withstands (properly sacrifices) all ethical teleology and esthetic immediacy. To hate self and other in the sense demanded by Jesus is, in other words, to develop the strongest sense of self-critique in regard to

¹¹Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 68.

¹²Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 70.

what properly constitutes single individuality – to relinquish what Kierkegaard calls in *Works of Love* immediate self-love and immediate preferential love, so that one learns to love “in the right way.”¹³ Like the *cogito*, single individuality is a concept of relationship. For de Silentio, then, the absolute duty to God involves liberating both divine being and human being from the contradictions that render the existence of each unnecessary: as we conceive (love) God, so we conceive (love) the neighbor. In conceiving and relating to God as absolute (rather than in terms of the teleology that renders God an impotent, other-worldly abstraction), we relate to and conceive of human beings as absolute: we avoid contradictorily sacrificing either self to other or other to self and begin, paradoxically, with both. (As Kierkegaard writes in *Philosophical Fragments*, what the paradox does is “unite the contradictories”: paradox is a moral and existential, not a logical, concept for Kierkegaard.¹⁴)

What Jesus, what the story of Abraham and Isaac, thus asks of us is that we make a beginning in existence that cannot be predicated on what is given either immediately and esthetically as individual or universally and teleologically as ethical. To exist in the esthetic is to attempt to control the finite, to have the finite on one’s own terms, an existence that, as de Silentio indicates, lacks any principle that would prevent it from becoming the demonic. To exist in the ethical is to recognize that one cannot have the finite on one’s own terms and so, in the language of de Silentio, infinitely to resign oneself to the loss of it. To be the faithful, single individual, however, is to recognize that one cannot have the finite on one’s own terms and then, rather than resign existence, resolve to love it: to be the faithful, single individual is to regain the finite, to learn how to position oneself in the finite, a movement, de Silentio is clear, that cannot be made on the basis of the finite. De Silentio expresses the ontology or ethics of this movement when he indicates that there is no passage from the esthetic to the ethical and then from the ethical to faith, that to come the least little bit further than one’s infinite resignation – to come to faith – requires faith: faith, he writes, as what he calls the highest, is also, he insists, merely “the least little bit more” than my infinite resignation; but, he insists, to get the least little bit more than my resignation to an ethical telos already requires faith. Yet, that to get faith requires faith means that one moves meaningfully only *in* faith, that one comes to faith only by beginning faithfully – that one moves from, within, and towards the demand that the single individual love both self and other as what de Silentio calls incommensurable individuals, individuals who are beyond compare, whose value is absolute and whose existence is, therefore, never to be regarded as unnecessary. “If this is not faith,” de Silentio writes, echoing Descartes, “then faith has never existed in the world precisely because it has always existed.”¹⁵ If one’s faith has always existed, then one has never resolved, once in the course of one’s life, to begin, belatedly, from nothing finite, from nothing given immediately, when called by the omnipotent God of creation to do so. “‘And God tempted Abraham,’” de Silentio writes, citing Scripture; “‘But Abraham answered: Here am I.’ You to whom these words are addressed,” de Silentio then asks his readers, “was this the case with you?”¹⁶ In thereby insisting to his readers that they have been called by God in precisely the way that Abraham was – that Abraham’s story is their story; that, like the *cogito*, Abraham’s story is both individual and universal – de Silentio nevertheless adds that, in the task of becoming the single, faithful individual, “it does

¹³Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 18.

¹⁴Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 61.

¹⁵Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 55.

¹⁶Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 21.

not help to have Abraham as father.”¹⁷ As Moses tells the children of Israel, “not with our fathers did the Lord make this covenant, but with us.”¹⁸ The principle that faith has never existed if it has always existed is thus the paradoxical guarantee of each individual’s singularity, of the right and obligation of every individual to make of existence a self-conscious project.

Yet, when de Silentio, echoing Moses, writes that it does not help the single individual to have Abraham as father, he adds that the one who works in the world of spirit as distinct from nature “gives birth to his father.”¹⁹ It is this paradoxical conception of temporality, in which the single individual becomes accountable for tradition, for history, for recreating and preserving the two, that, as we shall now see, Descartes shows to be central to the ontology of creation, Kierkegaard makes central to the question of how the single individual is justified, and the two thinkers together show constitutes the very basis of demonstration.

In the dedicatory letter that prefaces the *Meditations* Descartes insists to the Faculty of Theology at the Sorbonne that the proof of God’s existence belongs to philosophy, not to theology. For, he writes, while faith is proof enough for believers, unbelievers will regard as circular the argument that “we must believe in the existence of God because it is a doctrine of Holy Scripture, and conversely, that we must believe Holy Scripture because it comes from God.”²⁰ Yet, Descartes holds, citing Romans 1.20, unbelievers are without excuse, for “Ever since the creation of the world [God’s] invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.” For Descartes, what is expressed in the invisible power of God that we have no excuse but to “perceive” as it informs the circle of thought (doctrine) and existence is the idea, “quite clear to anyone who attentively considers the nature of time,” that “the same power and action are needed to preserve anything at each individual moment of its duration as would be required to create that thing anew if it were not yet in existence.”²¹

Attentively to consider the nature of time, then, for Descartes, is to see that creation expresses not a first event that occurred in the past but the preserving or upbuilding power that renders every moment creative. Creation as preservation thus liberates time from habit and convention, from being either static or arbitrary, transforming it into the time of self-conscious growth in which those principles that are creative of life are nurtured. Insofar as it involves preservation, creation bespeaks time as the time of agency, which is why Descartes insists that he can conceive of nothing greater than the will. Creation is thus the rubric through which we live our present, our history, in such a way that we are not merely its product but its producer. As Descartes writes, following Moses and anticipating Kierkegaard, “as regards my parents, it is certainly not they who preserve me; and in so far as I am a thinking thing, they did not even make me,” with the result, as I noted earlier, that “it would be impossible” to have within me “the idea of God” – the image of myself as having an origin that is irreducible to finite time – “were it not the case that God really existed.”²²

Descartes adds to the above that, “since I am dealing not just with the cause that produced

¹⁷Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 27.

¹⁸Deuteronomy 5.3.

¹⁹Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 27.

²⁰Descartes, *Meditations*, 3.

²¹Descartes, *Meditations*, 33.

²²Descartes, *Meditations*, 35.

me in the past but with that which preserves me at the present moment,”²³ God’s existence cannot be proved through an infinite regress. The existence of God is proved, rather, by our capacity to account for existence by beginning with its creative source, the will that, in binding together the human and divine, reconciles doubt with its creative ground, proceeding always from, within, and towards the necessary existence of both God and persons. In thus drawing out both the implications of attending carefully to the nature of time and what it is that constitutes the circle of Scriptural doctrine and divine existence, Descartes shows us that what comprises the demonstrative proof of Scripture is the capacity of individuals to rescue demonstration from infinite regress through the willingness to argue, in Kierkegaard’s terms, not to but from existence, the willingness to begin, in Descartes’ terms, with the premise that all are equal and whole and then continually to clarify the implications of their premises and values. The proof of God’s existence, of the truth of Descartes’ premises – of the *cogito*, of the wholeness, equality, and necessity of all single individuals – is, in other words, that they are radically non-hierarchical.

It is precisely the question of proof that de Silentio poses when he asks how the single individual who is to suspend ethics in light of the absolute duty to God “reassures himself that he is legitimate.” The problem, de Silentio writes, is that “If occasionally there is any response at all these days with regard to the paradox, it is likely to be: One judges it by the result.”²⁴ De Silentio remarks, however, that “since the creation of the world it has been customary for the result to come last” and, thus, that if one “is truly going to learn something from [Abraham] one must be particularly aware of the beginning.” For “If the one who is to act wants to judge himself by the result, he will never begin.”²⁵ The one, then, who wishes to judge by the result rather than by the spirit of the principle with which one has begun will never begin in faith. Yet, not to begin in faith is to begin with what de Silentio calls human calculation or thinking, which he aligns with ethics and esthetics: to think, for de Silentio, is merely to calculate and judge by the results – to annul either the individual in light of the universal (the ethical) or the universal in light of the individual (the esthetic). That is, when de Silentio claims that faith begins where thought stops it is critical to recognize that, unlike Descartes, who aligns thinking with the principle of the necessary existence of human beings that brings to a halt the infinite regress in the search for a creative beginning that never existed, he aligns thinking with the infinite progress to a calculated result that esthetically and ethically puts aside the principle of the incommensurability of single individuals, the principle that all are accountable for giving birth to their own history, the principle that faith excludes no one whose principles do not constitute self-exclusion. To begin faithfully is to respond, with Abraham, once in the course of one’s life, “Here am I,” as one recognizes that creation, the creation of oneself as the single individual who stands in absolute relation to the other as absolute, is the beginning that each of us must reiterate in our lives. Again, what justifies the knight of faith is that the knight’s premises are radically non-hierarchical.

Let me indicate in concluding this study that there are two further issues involved in the relationship between Descartes and Kierkegaard to which I want briefly to attend: first, the role of the ontological argument in the texts of the two thinkers; second, the absolute difference

²³Descartes, *Meditations*, 34.

²⁴Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 62.

²⁵Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 63.

that they draw between the principles and values that underpin their own texts and those to be found in the ancient Greek world.

The ontological argument – that God cannot be thought without existing – is central not only to Descartes' *Meditations* and *Discourse on Method* but also, for example, to Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*. In the *Meditations* and *Discourse* Descartes offers as proof of the existence of God the following demonstration: I am imperfect; the idea of the perfect, i.e. God, cannot come from the imperfect (the perfect, he argues, is prior to the imperfect, the infinite prior to the finite); I have in me the idea of the perfect; therefore, God necessarily exists. In *Philosophical Fragments* Kierkegaard offers a corresponding demonstration of God's existence: the idea of being helped by the god to come into existence – to be reborn – can have come only from the god incarnate in time; that is, the idea of coming into existence or being reborn could not have occurred to the one who has not yet come into existence or who has not yet been, and thus does not know what it means to be, reborn; I have indeed come into existence; therefore, God necessarily exists. The ontological argument, in other words, bespeaks precisely the belated beginning, the belated coming into existence that is not given naturally or immediately and that we first find in Genesis and then in the texts of Kierkegaard and Descartes. Yet, in holding that God must necessarily exist because one cannot derive the perfect from the imperfect, the infinite from the finite, and thus that there is one thing that cannot be thought by and could never have occurred to any human being, what Descartes and Kierkegaard actually show is that the ontological argument is not a logical demonstration but a moral and existential principle: not to proceed from the imperfect to the perfect, from the finite to the infinite but, instead, to recognize that one has in one's mind the idea of the perfect, the idea of the infinite, is to begin with the distinction between reason, on the hand, and the imagination and senses, on the other hand, with the notion of mind as independent of the finite, with the will as that in light of which we are created in the image of God, which then requires us to posit the equality and wholeness of all human beings; it is to begin not with what Kierkegaard calls, in *Philosophical Fragments*, human wrangling over what is mine and what is yours but with what he explicates as the genuine contemporaneity of all single individuals as they recognize, in being created in the image of God, that love is both the basis and the goal of existence. The truth or validity of the ontological argument lies, again, in its being radically non-hierarchical – in three ways: first, it is the critique of any hierarchical opposition between human beings and God; second, it is thus the critique of any hierarchical opposition between one human being and another; third, it eliminates any opposition between the human mind and the good as that opposition is found in the ancient Greek world – in, for example, the claims made explicitly by Socrates in the *Republic* that there exists absolutely no knowledge of the form of the good and that, because nothing incomplete (the appearances) is the measure of anything complete (the forms), from which all knowledge derives, all human wisdom is worthless. At stake for both Descartes and Kierkegaard in making the ontological argument central to their thinking, then, is the difference between Socratic ignorance of the good and the biblical demand that, in light of the knowledge of good and evil, we love the neighbor as the unqualified good of existence (and Kierkegaard is clear in *Works of Love* that what Socrates ultimately was ignorant of was the existence of the neighbor). In regard, then, to the absolute difference that Kierkegaard and Descartes draw between the principles and values that underpin their own texts and those to be found in the ancient Greek world I shall simply point out the following: Kierkegaard begins to establish his notion of faith by insisting, in *The Concept of Irony*, that “The similarity

between Christ and Socrates consists essentially in their dissimilarity,”²⁶ insofar as Socrates, Kierkegaard insists, had no conception of the neighbor, had no conception of sin, freedom, or single individuality; Descartes establishes his notion of reason by distinguishing his own philosophical method both from Socratic ignorance and from the law of contradiction as found in Plato and Aristotle (Descartes does this explicitly in “The Search for Truth by Means of the Natural Light” and *Principles of Philosophy*, and implicitly in the *Meditations* and *Discourse*).

What Kierkegaard and Descartes together show us, then, is, first, that faith is critique: it is the critique of ethics as teleology and of esthetics as immediacy, the critique of the idolatry of judging oneself by the results, the criterion in light of which we distinguish between ignorance of the good and knowledge of good and evil. It should also be remembered that de Silentio includes the concepts of sin, repentance, eternal consciousness, and salvation under the category of ethics, not of faith, and thus as part of his critique of the falsification of Christianity that Kierkegaard will later call Christendom, which, in *The Moment and Late Writings*, he explicates as the conflation of ancient Greek and biblical principles, the rationalization of paganism as Christianity, the confusion of God and Platonic Form: the so-called faith in God as an impotent thought and the abstract vanishing point of thought and existence. Faith, then, as the critique of Christendom, the critique of the falsification of Christianity, begins where “faith” stops. Second, it is also the case that reason, in beginning not with the ancient Greek law of contradiction but with the necessary existence and equality of self and other that is the core of the ontology of creation, begins with principles and values that are explicitly biblical. Kierkegaard and Descartes together teach us, then, that just as faith has a self-critical rationality, reason has a faithful core. That is, in beginning with Descartes as no less than Abraham the challenge to modern philosophers, Kierkegaard, like Descartes, shows that existence cannot be divided between faith and reason, that existence is faithful or rational only if it is both simultaneously.

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²⁶Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony*, 6.

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