

# For the Existence of Man: An Ontological Argument

Józef Tischner

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The ontological argument, formulated long ago by Anselm of Canterbury, then repeated many times in various versions, is known to us as an argument for the existence of God. We will attempt to give it a unique interpretation—so that it will serve as an argument for the existence of man. There are, as it seems, two reasons for the “death of man”: death that strives to free the other from the heavy load that I am for him, and death undertaken to sacrifice oneself for the other. In both instances “one dies so that the other may live.” Being-for-oneself becomes being-against-oneself. Man ceases to exist, because “he has no right to exist.” He has no right to exist because he believes that he is, or might be, guilty of the evil that happens all around him. Consciousness of this fault will become his affliction. Man can regain the right to exist, however, if he discovers that he “is not all evil.” He can regain certainty of being—self-confidence—by participating in

74 the good. Through this participation man can “agree to be himself” and feel “happy to be a man.”

Man’s consent to himself is the middle road between escape into nothingness and escape into God—between annihilation and deification. However, this agreement would not be possible without some experience of the good.

Do the two versions of the death of man cited above exhaust all possible variants of this death? Specifically, do they include what so-called postmodernism understands by this concept? It seems that we have to introduce a substantial distinction between the proper and improper understanding of death. “The death of man” can be the death of one who has once existed and then died, and the death of one who never was—who was not yet born. Now, if I properly understand the intentions of postmodernism, then the latter position is decidedly closer to it. In a certain sense it duplicates the stance of Nietzsche, who proclaims the coming of the over-man through the lips of Zarathustra; the *ubermensch* who is yet to be born will be “a real man.”

On the other hand, Nietzsche seems less skeptical in relation to “humanity,” as much as he accepts that “real man” already once existed—before Christianity, in pagan antiquity. Death signals a loss of independence. Man became a non-independent being, he rid himself of his “substance,” he stripped himself of all characteristics of independence—he decided to exist with the existence of a shrub, which needs constant aid from the outside. Despite this, it still seems to him that he is a man—he has this illusion to the degree he has lied to himself. This is the problem: man’s illusion has become his reality. It seems that man is the only creature on Earth who can take his illusions about himself and take them for the reality about himself. Is it possible to return from illusion to reality? Is it possible to turn back the lie? What might the road back be like?

This problem is, at the same time, the problem of the “game.” Can you “play the role” of a man? Is humanity one of the roles played by “something” or “someone” in the drama of existence, or is it beyond all roles? Is it a substance that endures at the substrate of all roles?

Without a doubt, the analyses of Charles Taylor about the making of modern identity are signposts along the way from the “falsehood” toward the “truth” of man. Relying upon remarkably rich and varied sources, the author reaches the following conclusion: consciousness of identity is tied closely with consciousness of the good. In other words, man searches for himself wherever he feels some good. “I define who I am by defining where I speak from, in the family tree, in social space, in the geography of social statuses and functions, in my intimate relations to the ones I love, and also crucially in the space of moral and spiritual orientation within which my most important defining relations are lived out.”

We could say: I am the drama in which I participate. Who is Antigone? Antigone is whatever her drama might be. However, we are incapable of understanding this drama without referring to the good. Taylor writes,

“For those with strong commitment to such a good, what it means is that 75 this, above all others, provides the landmarks for what they judge to be the direction of their lives.”

However, the author does not undertake studies of the phenomenology of the good—he works as a historian of ideas. Similarly, in his studies about selfhood he does not go beyond interpretations of the witness of others. It is obvious that in both matters we are far from a consensus. Despite that the direction of the researches is clear: the search for identity directs itself “beyond being and non-being,” beyond the forms and structures of ontology, grammar or gramatology, simply toward the simplicity of “*some kind of goodness,*” which by being man’s share, “*in the joy of being gives birth to man.*”

## Agathology and the Ontology of God

Let us move on to St. Anselm of Canterbury’s text. This text has the character of a conversation with God—a prayer. As such it is part of man’s drama with God; it does not only talk about the drama, instead it forms an element of it. Right from the beginning the text tries to avoid the danger of objectifying God. You cannot speak of God in the same way you speak of everything else, like you speak about any old object. About God you must speak in a Divine way, meaning, piously. Piety does not exclude criticism. Quite the contrary: only piety demands criticism, because it introduces the conviction that God is “other” than our thinking and speaking about God. Our thinking and speaking about God are always in some measure a form of blasphemy. When we speak about God we cannot help but speak of ourselves. Therefore we talk about ourselves consciously. But then every step into the depth of God’s mystery should be atoned for by prayer.

We read, “Therefore, o Lord, You who give understanding to faith, grant me to understand—to the degree You know to be advantageous—that You exist, as we believe, and that You are what we believe [You to be]. Indeed, we believe You to be that beyond which nothing greater can be thought... But surely that beyond which a greater cannot be thought cannot be only in the understanding. For if it were only in the understanding, it could be thought to exist also in reality—and this is something greater. Therefore, if that beyond which a greater cannot be thought were only in the understanding, then that beyond which a greater *cannot* be thought would be that beyond which something greater *can* be thought! But surely this [conclusion] is impossible. Hence, without a doubt, something beyond which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the understanding and in reality.” (93-94)

Talk of God becomes talk of man—of his intellect and of what it contains. Thinking creates a circle: prayer begins, and makes God present in the mode of faith (“faith seeking understanding”), it moves onto an analysis of man’s intellect and what it contains, all in order to return

76 to God—a God who is no longer just a God of faith, but also a God of understanding.

The key matter for an interpreting the ontological argument is the meaning of the words, “we believe You to be something of which nothing greater can be thought.” Usually we say this refers to a “infinitely perfect” being. This being, since it is to be “infinitely perfect,” must, among other qualities, possess the quality of existence. Yet sometimes, instead of speaking of an “infinitely perfect being,” we also talk of a being that is necessary, or even of an “omnipotent being.” Differences in understanding influence the difference in interpreting this argument. In the one instance the existence of God flows out of the inner “necessity” of being, in the other from His “omnipotence”—either way, being remains, it is only its logical that justification changes. Where is the essence of the problem?

If we understand the words, “[You are] something beyond which nothing greater can be thought,” to refer to a being that is infinitely perfect, then this will mean that we still remain in the space of ontology, and surrender our thinking to the “logic of being and non-being.” It is much the same when we speak of a necessary being or an omnipotent being. Out of our presuppositions the thesis that a “being” thought in this way must exist will force itself upon us. But will this signal that such a being really exists? Many books have been written on this topic. As we know, there are still many supporters and detractors of this argument. This is neither the time nor place to discuss this. Let’s take up a different presupposition and claim that “that beyond which nothing greater can be thought,” is the Good as a transcendental. What do we gain by this? Then we move beyond ontology and we move from the level of “the logic of being” to “the dramaturgy of the good.”

Is this interpretation in accordance with the intentions of Anselm? It seems to contradict it in no way. After all, it is only thanks to an “intuition of the good” that Anselm can think about “something” that is greatest; the best, the highest, most perfect. His intuition of that which is the greatest is the main strength of his thought.

I must admit that it would be difficult to find within Anselm’s texts interpretation that unambiguously support this reading. The most proper support for our analyses is indubitably Descartes. The thought of Descartes has the features of a thought liberated from the grasp of ontology in many of its points. Let us also leave this matter off to one side. We will now consider the consequences of the presupposition we have taken up.

This is my proposal for an interpretation of the famous argument: that beyond which nothing greater can be thought is the absolute Good. Can the absolute Good not exist? The Good somehow “strives” to come into being. The absolute Good strives to come into being in an absolute manner. That which strives to exist in an absolute manner must come into being. Its being must be such that it meets its demand to exist. God—as the absolute Good—exists.

We know this from our very own internal experience. I want the good, I do not want evil. I participate in that which I want, and I want that in which I participate. My participation in the good and opening up to the good manifests itself in various ways: as wishing for the good, dreaming about the good, desiring the good, also as the feeling of responsibility for the good. Consciousness of participating in the good closely tied with the consciousness of a possible participation in a lack of the good—in some evil. But it is this precisely that I do not want, I do not wish for this, I do not desire it, I run from it.

I am a being-for-myself. As being-for-myself, I want myself. I would not be a being-for-myself and would not want myself if not for the intuition of the good which might constitute me. I want to exist in the measure of the good in which I have, or can have, participation.

To participate in the good still does not signify being good. The desire of the good bumps up against obstacles within me. “For the good that I want, I do not do...” The obstacle is myself—I am finite, fallible and wandering. The absolute imperative to exist which constitutes the essence of the good is not “effective” in me. How does this work with God?

God is the absolute Good. He not only participates in the good, He is the Good. What does it mean to “be the Good?” To be the Good—the absolute Good—means being independent of the goodness of all other goods, which when compared to the absolute Good necessarily take on a relative character. Here independence means freedom. It is impossible to think of the absolute Good as a relative good which is dependent. Freedom is the most basic property of the Good. The good cannot be a non-conscious good. Consciousness, next to freedom, is another essential property of the Good.

The tertiary place of the dramaturgic order of “properties” is taken by “power of being.” The relative good can come into being, but it does not have to come into being. It is different with the absolute Good. Its power derives from its absolute power, its being omnipotent. Its power is beyond all power, including the power of existence. The absolute Good, in which the absolute imperative to exist “dwells,” cannot fail to exist.

God is not the absolute Good, and the absolute freedom and consciousness, because He exists in an absolute manner; rather He exists in an absolute manner, because He the absolute Good, consciousness and freedom.

I have already noted that the logic of this argument is not the logic of ontology, but the logic of drama. You cannot derive the idea of freedom, of self-knowledge, and of omnipotence analytically from the idea of the Good. Freedom, self-knowledge and omnipotence are not the same thing, as the angles of a triangle. Yet, you cannot think the idea of the Good without self-knowledge of the Good, without its freedom and without the power of the absolute Good. On what basis then? The basis is, if we may put it this way, the categorical imperative understood absolutely, in which the “should be” becomes “it cannot be otherwise.”

To capture the difference between the logic of ontology and the logic of drama, let us try the following exercise, by replacing the word “is” with the word “has.” Then we would say: God has freedom, God has consciousness, God has power. Thanks to what God “has,” God is God. Does this mean that God could “not have” freedom, consciousness and infinite power? Would He still be God?

Either way, you can think something along those lines without falling into internal contradiction. The Greek gods did not have these “properties,” but they still were gods. And yet it is impossible to conceive that an infinitely good Being would not have these qualities. Why? Because then something would be out of kilter, if the “divinity” didn’t not know that it was good, could be “evil,” if it were not free, then it might be dependent on evil.

The following fragment from Meister Eckhart throws a certain light upon outlining a dramaturgy of the Good, “In the good man, goodness gives birth to itself and everything that it is. Being, knowing, loving and working—goodness pours all this into the good man, and the good man accepts all his being, knowing, loving and working from the innermost heart of goodness and from it alone.” What does it mean to say that “goodness gives birth”?

It does mean at the very least that we are not talking about “emanations” or logical consequences. “Being” does not “emanate” from the good, like light from a candle. Nor does it emerge like a conclusion deduced from the premises. “Being born” suggests thinking of consciousness and freedom: you cannot give birth without being conscious of it, and you cannot give birth if you do not want to give birth. The relation of “giving birth” has is dramatic in nature. It is also significant that “giving birth” involves being and existence, “...and the good man accepts all his being...” Ontology has been subjected to agathology, that is, the logic of being to the logic of the good. God endows himself and the world with existence according to the laws of “the drama of being.” This is beyond being and non-being.

Now we can better understand what the words “being-through-myself” mean. God is being-through-myself. It means that existence moves through the absolute goodness itself.

## The Ontology and Agathology of Man

In Jean-Paul Sartre we find an attempt to shift the ontological argument from the philosophy of God right into the interior of the philosophy of man. The introduction to Sartre’s *L’être et le néant* has a short section entitled “The Ontological Proof.” We find there a concise summary of earlier intuitions, in which the author attempted to show the specific relationship between the consciousness of being and the being of consciousness. We read: “the phenomenon of being is ‘ontological’ in the sense that we speak of the *ontological* proof of St. Anselm and Descartes. It is an appeal to being; it requires a phenomenon, a foundation that is transphenomenal.”

Further on we read: “Consciousness is consciousness of something. This 79 means that transcendence is the constitutive structure of consciousness; that is, that consciousness is born *supported* by a being which is not itself. This is what we call the ontological proof.”

Jean-Paul Sartre wants to show the particularity of human existence—being-for-myself—in distinction from the being-in-itself of objects and things. Man is characterized by the fact that his being precedes his essence. We become aware of what we are through consciousness of that which we encounter in the world as transcendent toward consciousness. Consciousness of that which is transcendent has a “positional” character (intentional, objective).

Consciousness of self, seemingly achieved on the margins of the consciousness of a transcendent object, has a “non-positional” character, meaning pre-objective. Both one and the other consciousness is submerged in being. This is because, “Every conscious existence exists as consciousness of existing.” Sartre “spies in” on this moment when positionality shifts. Self-consciousness owes the consciousness of its existence to the consciousness of the existence of the object toward which it is directed. The subject knows that it is through its consciousness of the object it comes to know. Sartre says that self-consciousness “is born.” This is a felicitous choice of words. Consciousness of the object “fertilizes” the consciousness of the subject. It is “born” as that which already was, but only now does it finally see the light of day.

What constitutes the ontological manner of this argument? Just as in ontological proof, where from thinking about a circumscribed object you make a conclusion about its existence, so in Sartre the intentional ascertainment of the object’s existence gives birth to consciousness of the existence of an ascertaining subject. Yet an analogy does not make for an identity. The phrase “gives birth” in place of the word “conclusion” points toward a difference. This word creates new problems. When we take it up we have to leave the territory of ontology.

This is because the whole of Sartre’s analysis is contained within the framework of ontology. Sartre operates with two basic concepts: essence and existence. He asks, “What comes before what”? The possible answers are limited from above by the net created by the concepts utilized. Either existence precedes essence or essence precedes existence. Doesn’t this, and only this, alternative impoverish the dramaturgic richness of consciousness? Even at a first glance it seems that it does impoverish. In order to unveil the drama you must rise “above” ontology.

Let’s first ask what it means to “give birth.”

The metaphor of giving birth is used to describe phenomena that do not fit within categories of causality. Giving birth is not a variety of causal relation. The mother gives birth, but the mother is neither the efficient, nor final, nor formal, nor material cause of the child that is born. What is she? A mother. It is the same when it comes to the father; the father is not a cause, he is a father.

The midwife helps with the birth. Her help also does not fall into categories of cause and effect. Giving birth is not ontological, even though the fruit of the birth *is*, and is a being. In birth that which is hidden is revealed. Birthing is a bringing into the light.

Bringing to light has its ontological corollaries. After a birth we can say, “we have a child,” and also, “I am a mother. I am a father.” The word “have” points to some good, “am” constitutes a designation of being. Agathological experience has become the basis of positional consciousness that determines the meaning of being.

Giving birth is well-suited to describing the mystery of light. It also brings to light that which already existed earlier. On the other hand, were it not for light, then that which existed earlier would not, as it were, exist. Thanks to light, the world was born to man. Man can say, “this is, that is, it is there, it is here, etc.” The “world” is that which always appears within the field of light. To use Husserl’s terminology, the world is that whose meaning was “constituted.” “Constitution” (“the genesis of constituting”) is a concept that points to the “birth of light-meaning.” Meaning constitutes itself where something is possible. Meaning as an outlining of a field of possibility precedes all facticity.

Let’s now ask a crucial question: “What is man’s field of possibility?” In other words, under what conditions in man can “man be born”?

First let’s take a look at the nature of this space, which becomes the proper dimension of man’s birth, his natural matrix, the native soul of humanity. Here we are talking of the “interior space of consciousness.” The category of space causes objects to arrange themselves for us “one next to the other.” The interior space of consciousness has a similar effect. It allows life-experiences to arrange themselves one next to the other. What does this actually mean? Can we say that is the case for all our experiences? We know that Kant utilized categories of space exclusively for the givens of external senses, while solely maintaining categories of time for the interior sense. When we speak of an interior space here, we must explain what kind of space we are talking about.

Interior space is not a “flat” space; it has its own surface and depth. Henri Bergson and Max Scheler, among others, wrote about this. Bergson wrote about a depth-I and a surface-I—of free acts that come from the depth of consciousness and come out through the shell of the surface-I in unpredictable acts. Scheler spoke of our manner of experiencing the highest values: the higher the value, the deeper our way of feeling it.

Depth means that interior consciousness of oneself has something like three dimensions, thanks to which some experiences unveil themselves as “closer,” others as “further,” still others as more or less important. The pain of an injured arm lies “further” than the pain of longing after a beloved person—it is as if it were less important. The despair which bites into a man is more “dangerous” than an aching tooth, even though the suffering from it can seem just as strong as the pain of despair. The interior space of consciousness hides some kind of paradox. On the one

hand everything has its place within it, but on the other, everything can leave its place and occupy a foreign place. 81

This is what happens in the case of internal deception. When that happens, one experience “plays the role of another,” one pushes out another, knocks it below the threshold of consciousness, it veils or changes its meaning. Something similar can be said about the “battle” between experiences—the battle of good thoughts against bad ones, the battle between love and hatred, hope with despair; it appears as if experiences “battle” to find their place in consciousness. The paradox of the interior space means that in some measure those—like Bergson himself—who warn us against a too literal understanding of the “interior space of consciousness” are right, just as those—like the Freudian school—who do not have the slightest objections to it are also to some degree correct. When we give credit to both sides, then we must ask about the proper sense of the interior space of consciousness. Where does the principle of experiences switching “places” reside within this space? What is the mechanism of switching?

The interior space of consciousness has an agathological sense and it orders itself according to the principle of importance. This, above all, signifies that it is sensitive to the possibility of evil. The possibility of evil signifies the consciousness of the possibility of evil. On its coattails come the possibility of the fall, guilt and despair. The consciousness of a possibility is not objective by nature: what is at stake is not that an object like “despair” is at all possible, but that despair makes itself present. It is not yet there, but it is as if it already was there: despair is the “dark power” which hope continually overcomes.

Hope reveals itself within this conflict as “the bearer of the good.” Sensitivity to the good and evil means that the interior space of consciousness has an agathological character. Its logic is the logic of significance. Significance is the possibility of re-arranging some experiences over others. We could say: everything which makes itself present in the inner space of consciousness is marked by rearrangability. The experiences in themselves, independent of their references based upon reflection, conduct a battle for the “better” with other “neighboring” experiences. Bad thoughts want to be switched for good ones, hatred wants to dominate love, despair wants to push hope into the abyss.

What is the principle of rearranging? The principle is a concrete life. It has been said that man does not live by bread alone. Man not only “experiences something,” man above all “lives by what he experiences.” Man “lives by good thoughts,” “lives in hope,” “lives by love.” And how does it stand with man’s humanity?

Before we take up this question, we will say a couple more words about Sartrean “moment of positionality.” Sartre expands upon analyses of acts of consciousness presented by Husserl. The positional moment—called a thetic moment by Husserl—exclusively characterizes intentional acts of consciousness, meaning, acts directed at objects.

It signals the acknowledgment of the object's existence. In Husserl the source of acknowledgment was a transcendental consciousness that exists "absolutely." This consciousness as the "absolute" source of the light "acknowledged" and in a way "conferred" the shine with which the object shines. In Sartre the point of gravity is shifted onto the object; above all, it shines. The brilliance of the object moves onto the subject, which takes on an existential character, thanks to positionality. The subject finds itself within "being," which "already is and is given."

Regardless of how original and interesting Sartre's thought might be, it merely originated out of a reversal of chess pieces on the same chessboard. By introducing the idea of an agathological space, however, we have accomplished a radical change of the chessboard and the pieces. We have entered a different drama. Within this drama the positional moment was "subjected" to the moment of significance.

It has shown its other side. That which is, is as much as it has significance. The stance of realism which promises that it will transport the consciousness into the realm of that which "really is" only makes sense when earlier it has become significant "that something is." But why has it become significant? Realism does not know!

We have said: the interior space of consciousness has an agathological meaning. The agathological defines its structure, which is not just as structure of "one next to the other," or "one overlaps the other," but also "one above/below the other." Interior space is hierarchical; however, this does not mean that the borders of "places" within it are clearly marked out. Kant had many reasons for settling for the category of time, as it is certain that within this sphere time creates much clearer divisions; yet even they, in certain moments, begin to blur. "In the depths" of consciousness there no longer is time, yet the hierarchy of significance remains.

The agathological space of consciousness is the condition of possibility for the humanity of man—his being himself as a human being. Both of these concepts, "humanity" and "being himself" should be treated as being in symbiotic equilibrium. This is because the "death of man" signifies the death of his "being himself"; at the same time the death of "being himself" is the "death of man." Equilibrium, of course, does not signify equivalence. We will return to the topic of meanings later.

Let's return to the metaphor of birth. Being oneself—humanity—is that which is born. The thing that is born is something that already was. It existed as if it were not. To be born means to "come out into the light" and "to see the light." A birth must be "fertilized." "Fertilization" is not the "cause" of the birth and the birth is not "result" of fertilization. In the case of being oneself and humanity, it is not the case that being oneself is born on its own; on the contrary, you cannot be yourself if you do not want to be. The paradox of man comes from his, on the one hand, having "already been born" (he was born), and on the other, "he gives birth to himself."

Here we will attempt to develop our description by connecting our analyses with the thought of Søren Kierkegaard.

Being oneself is the fruit of negating that which reveals itself as <sup>83</sup> negation—the fruit of negating despair. In order to be yourself you have to pass through the trial of despair. He who becomes himself chooses himself in the situation of being endangered by despair. As Kierkegaard puts it, “This has particularly struck me in considering certain German philosophers. Their thought is composed, the objective logical thought is brought to rest in its corresponding objectivity, and yet they are in despair even though they distract themselves with objective thinking, for there are many ways a person can distract himself and scarcely any sedative is more effective than abstract thinking, since there it is a matter of conducting oneself as impersonally as possible. Doubt and despair therefore belong to two quite different spheres, different sides of the soul are set in motion. Still, I am not at all content with this, because doubt and despair would then rank equally and that is not the case. Despair is a far deeper and more complete expression, its movement far more comprehensive than doubt’s. Precisely, despair is an expression of the whole personality, doubt only of thought. The reputed objectivity of doubt, what makes it so distinguished, is precisely an expression of its incompleteness. Doubt, therefore, lies in difference, despair in the absolute.”

Despair is negation—radical negation. The blade of negation reaches for the absolute. Thus what is at stake is not exclusively a negation of being. If only that was at stake, then our drama would be still taking place upon the scene of certainty and would be concerned with the dramaturgy between positional moments of acts of consciousness. The drama of despair is concerned with that which justifies or refuses justification for being. This is the reason why despair can be a “sickness unto death”—the desire for a death which cannot come, “When death is the greatest danger, one hopes for life. But when one learns to know the even more horrifying danger, one hopes for death. When the dangers is so great that death has become the hope, then despair is the hopelessness of not even being able to die.”

It would be a serious misunderstanding if we were to include despair in the category of moods, experiences, or acts of consciousness. This is not to say that despair does not find its expression on the level of attunement, feeling, or acting. Despair reaches deeper, it touches the “bottom” of the person. What does it tell the person? What does it want to convince him of? That he “is evil.” It seems to me that it is impossible to understand despair without falling back upon the concept of evil. The whole defense against despair which the person undertakes is in its essence a defense against evil. We should say that, in drama, what is at stake essentially is not despair, but evil. Despair is only a reflection of the evil which makes itself present and which gathers in the person for itself.

The language of religion in this case speaks of sin. Sin has two sides: despair and condemnation. Sin condemns. It condemns the person who made it come to be between people. It condemns absolutely. This means that no circumstances explain the sinner—he is “evil.” Evil outside

84 the sinner is just the “phenomenon” of evil. It has become a “substance” within the sinner. Lying has become a liar; the murder a murderer; betrayal a betrayer. The sinner’s responsibility is the responsibility to “substantialize” evil.

Is there a possibility of rebirth? It’s been said, “Overcome evil with good.” However, are there such conditions of possibility; are we given the matrix of this perspective?

Kierkegaard’s key text on this topic is quite unclear, but it is nonetheless fundamental. Lack of clarity also has its purpose, it serves to define a perspective. Kierkegaard writes, “I have only one answer: ‘Despair!’” Further on he says, “In general, one cannot despair at all unless one wants to, but in order truly to despair one must truly want to, but when one truly wills despair one is truly beyond it; when one has truly chosen despair one has truly chosen what despair chooses, namely oneself in one’s eternal validity. It is only in despair that the personality is assuaged, though not with necessity, for I never despair necessarily, but with freedom, and only in despair is the absolute attained.” Yet, what does it mean to “want” despair? Does it mean the same as not to want despair? Can you want and not want despair simultaneously? When you want despair and choose despair, is it possible to exit from despair? Does the choice itself of “one’s eternal validity” overcome the negation of one’s value in despair?

Kierkegaard continues later on, “In choosing absolutely, then, I choose despair, and in despair I choose the absolute, for I myself am the absolute, I posit the absolute and am myself the absolute. But as amounts to exactly the same, I must say: I choose the absolute which chooses me, I posit the absolute which posits me. For unless I bear in mind that this second expression is just as absolute, my category of choice is false; for that category is precisely the identity of both. What I choose I do not posit, for if it were not posited I could not choose it, and yet if it were not posited through my choosing it I would not choose it. It *is*, for if it was not I could not choose it; it *is not*, for it only comes to be by my choosing it, otherwise my choice would be illusory.” Is this not reminiscent of the ontological proof? Does it not signify being born from one’s nothingness?

Still further on we read, “But what, then, do I choose? This thing or that? No, I choose absolutely, and I choose absolutely precisely through having chosen not to choose this thing or that. I choose the absolute, and what is the absolute? It is myself in my eternal validity.” This does not end the questions. One more question appears, the most basic: “But what, then, is this self of mine? If it is to be a matter of a first glance, a first shot at a definition, my answer is: it is the most abstract thing of all which yet, at the same time, is the most concrete thing of all—it is freedom... This self he thus chooses is infinitely concrete, for it is himself, and yet it is absolutely different from his former self, for he has chosen it absolutely. This self did not exist previously, for it came into existence through the choice, and yet it has been in existence, for it was indeed ‘he himself.’”

The question remains whether it is not the case that Kierkegaard <sup>85</sup> imputes too much power to freedom. Does he not therefore move from a metaphor of birth to a metaphor of creation? Is the self still born or created through freedom? Maybe the self itself is freedom? Or perhaps Kierkegaard has overlooked some important link in the genesis of the self?

Before I take up this question I would like to turn my attention to an analogy between Kierkegaard's and Hegel's takes on freedom. Despite his row with Hegel, Kierkegaard seems to be indebted to him when it comes to the issue of freedom. Perhaps these words from Hegel will throw more light on the "creative" moments of freedom: "As the essence of Matter is Gravity, so, on the other hand, we may affirm that the substance, the essence of Spirit is Freedom. All will readily assent to the doctrine that Spirit, among other properties, is also endowed with Freedom; but philosophy teaches that all the qualities of Spirit exist only through Freedom; that all are but means for attaining Freedom; that all seek and produce this and this alone. It is a result of speculative Philosophy, that Freedom is the sole truth of the Spirit... For if I am dependent, my being is referred to something else which I am not; I cannot exist independently of something external. I am free, on the contrary, when my existence depends upon myself. This self-contained existence of Spirit is none other than self-consciousness—consciousness of one's own being. Two things must be distinguished in consciousness; first the fact *that I know*; secondly, *what I know*. In *self* consciousness these are merged in one; for Spirit *knows itself*. It involves an appreciation of its own nature, as also an energy enabling it to realize itself; to make itself *actually* that which it is *potentially*."

To be free means to be your own. The road to it is independence. Whoever is dependent is not free. In order to become independent, you must "create" yourself. But it is a specific kind of "creating" that depends upon the ability make oneself *actually* that which one is *potentially* in oneself. In the end man is independent, but does not know it. This ends up making him dependent. Only knowledge about independence really liberates. In Kierkegaard the accent rather falls upon choice. By choosing despair I choose myself. Choosing despair gives despair the slip, it liberates one from despair, by climbing above it.

Agreed. But what kind of liberation is at stake? Does it exclude freedom understood as an "understanding of necessity"? By choosing despair, one can be "himself despairing" and as an authentic and despairing-I, I can become a being-against-himself. Either way the drama turns against me. We know that neither Hegel nor Kierkegaard allowed for such a possibility. Why? What stopped them? Did they clearly say anything about it?

In order to bring to light the missing link we will reach for a different kind of thinking—thinking which talks about the good more clearly. We will look at Meister Eckhart's texts, but to put them in the proper light we will attempt to grasp the problem of the I's genesis from a somewhat different angle.

Kierkegaard talks about despair. What is the opposite of despair? Hope is the opposite. We must then ask, “How is hope possible in a despairing consciousness?”

Above all, it seems that hope is impossible. The tragism of despair depends upon despair making hope impossible. If hope were possible, then there would be no despair. We say, “There is no hope for you.” Maybe somewhere out there, maybe for someone else there is hope, but there is no hope for you. These words are the beginning of a Dantean hell.

Why is there no hope for those in Dante’s hell? We can propose two conjectures: they are unworthy of hope, or they are too proud to take anything from the outside. In the first instance the gift of hope would be contrary to the order of values, in the second, the gift of hope would hit upon the resistance of a totally closed off consciousness. Which way does Kierkegaard’s resolution head? What does his choice of hope and the concomitant choice of oneself as an absolute value mean?

The answer is not clear. Kierkegaard—when we take into consideration the above-cited texts—does not exclude being oneself as a despairing humanity. Being oneself means here: to carry within oneself the misfortune of despair and to see precisely within this one’s own absolute value. But is this choice not the choice of a new dependence? Is it not a fall into the demonic? If that were the case, then it would mean that hope is all the more impossible.

Despite this, the impossible happens. Hope overcomes despair. The victory of hope over despair is an integral part of the ontological argument, thanks to which from being oneself as an idea, being oneself is actually born. To throw some light upon the depth of this impossibility we now will reach for the thought of Meister Eckhart. All of them speak of the good. They presuppose that *bonum est diffusivum sui* and that it must be accepted by man in a free fashion, because only evil utilizes force.

What does it mean to say that *bonum est diffusivum sui*? It means that the causality of the good is not identical with the causality of being: it does not care about proportions, it does not worry about sufficient reasons, and it does not exhaust its strength in acting. When being acts, its result must be proportional to the cause. When the good acts nobody dares measure the proportions. When being acts, it acts according to sufficient reason. When the good acts, just the possibility of acting is a sufficient reason. When being acts, after a while it feels “tired” and “exhausted” by acting. When the good acts none of its “good acts” exhaust it, instead they deepen it and gives it strength. Being willingly “rests,” while the good “does not know rest.” One more characteristic trait: when being acts, it destroys other beings, or it moves them from place to place. When the good acts it saves other goods and from this comes the respect for freedom. Goodness itself is the good of man. It defines his autonomy. If an act of the good destroyed freedom, then it would be evil acting.

The good acts like grace. The idea of grace serves to explain the possibility of that which is impossible—the movement from despair to

hope. It should not be overlooked in analyses of the human drama. If we <sup>87</sup> overlook it then we are left with only the concept of fate.

It is characteristic that none of the great descriptions of human consciousness, from St. Augustine up to Hegel and Husserl, do without the idea of the “absolute.” This idea takes on various meanings and has its own rich history. Without going into the details of this history one thing is worthy of underscoring: the idea of consciousness is tied in a specific way with the idea of the good. There is something natural in the formula the “absolute good.” Just like there is something natural in the formula “absolute consciousness.”

Thus, when we run across the adjective absolute in these writers, without regard for possible mistake, we think: consciousness of the good. On the other hand, without any risk we can think about the consciousness and good reading Meister Eckhart. But we should add that in his thought the “absolute good” and “absolute consciousness” are the God who loves. With Eckhart we stand within a new dramatic perspective—within a drama with God. We could ask, “Does God know about the death of man?” Does God—that which is absolute—let man “die”?

The thing that is most striking about Meister Eckhart’s texts is the daring with which they speak about God. We find statements like, “If I deny my own will, putting it in the hands of my superior, and want nothing for myself, then God must want it for me, and if he fails me in this matter, he will be failing himself. So in all things, when I do not want something for myself, God wants it for me.”

Meister Eckhart has no doubts: God has to. Not even sin is an obstacle, “Yes, that man would indeed be established in God’s will who would not wish that the sin into which he had fallen never been committed; not because it was against God, but since, through that, you are obliged to greater love, and, through that, brought low and humbled. He should only wish that he had not acted against God. But you should indeed trust God, that he would not have inflicted this on you, had he not wished to from it what is best for you. But when a man with all his resolution rises up from his sins and turns wholly away from them, our faithful God then acts as if he had never fallen into sin. For all his sins, God will not allow him for one moment to suffer.”

Whence comes Eckhart’s confidence? It comes from his intuition of the good. The intuition of the good brings to light its internal dramaturgy. The good is the desire for an even greater good. Every trial that the good faces deepens it and makes it the good all the more. Let us repeat: every trial, even the trial of sin, the trial of evil. In the encounter with evil the good becomes consciousness of the good, and consciousness of the good is nothing else than the desire to be the good even more.

Eckhart makes man the center of the good’s “dialectic.” We are “beyond being and non-being,” within the “agathological drama”—a drama from which being is supposed to be born. Evil has its place within this

88 drama, it is off somewhere on the side. Evil has its meaning, but without its participation the drama would go on all the same.

Here we will return to a well-known text of Meister Eckhart: “Goodness is not created, not made, not born; rather it is what gives birth and bears the good man, and the good man, insofar as he is good, is unmade and uncreated, yet he is born, the child and the son of goodness.” Being born is conditioned by fertilization. The soul should let itself be fertilized. It requires an opening up and passivity.

Or to use Eckhart’s language here, it would require obedience, something like, “not my will, but Yours.” At this point we run up against a divergence from Kierkegaard; when Kierkegaard speaks of “choosing oneself,” Meister Eckhart talks of “renouncing oneself.” Is this difference a contradiction? Not necessarily. Opening up is also a choice. Not my will, but Yours is also a choice. The problem is whether this choice signifies—as Kierkegaard suggests—a choice of one’s own infinite value. It seems rather that it is a choice of risk, of losing oneself without certainty that one will regain oneself. Such risk and such losing oneself is a sacrifice.

According to Meister Eckhart such a sacrifice cannot remain unanswered, because it is a good that calls out. The highest good, pure and absolute, cannot remain indifferent toward such a calling.

On the other hand we must admit that the opposite is also true. Whoever “fertilizes” also desires to be “fertilized.” His risk comes first. His sacrifice precedes the “sacrifice of man.” The one who calls out is also called. The father fertilizes the son, while the son allows for a realization of fatherhood.

It is crucial that the dramaturgy of calls and responses to calls is not a dramaturgy of compulsion, but rather a dramaturgy of freedom. Freedom is exposed to the possibility of “refusal.” After all, nothing much will happen if there is no fertilization. Despair will remain. But one can live with despair and be oneself. Yet, if there was no “refusal,” if an “entrance” into the drama of the good were accomplished, then one more thing is unveiled: the experience of freedom is accompanied by the experience of grace. Whoever chooses despair, chooses the logic of fate. Whoever chooses the calling, chooses grace—the grace of hope.

The idea of grace explains how the jump from despair to hope is possible. I said that from a certain perspective this jump is not possible. The man who has fallen into despair is not capable of getting out of the state of despair using “his own powers.” If he had enough strength to do this, then he certainly would not fall into despair. The exit toward the side of hope is accomplished through the Other. The very risk of a call is a grain of hope. Hope reaches its fullness when it becomes aware that there is a confidant of hope. Here is the One in whom I confide my hope, but also the opposite is true: here I am, the one who accepts His hope.

This mutual confiding of hope is the opposite of the death of man.