

Understanding Death as Life's Paradox

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By

Brayton Polka

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PREFACE

In my book I focus on death as life's paradox in order to test, to put on trial, what it means for us human beings to exist. No one of us chooses to be born. Yet, having been born, we must choose to have been born, to live, to exist. To exist is to choose to exist. To choose to exist is to live with our choices. Still, the paradox of life is that the sole guarantee of life, the sole thing sure in our life, is that we die. The one thing that parents know for sure in bringing a new human being into the world is that their baby will die, sooner or later. What, then, is life, the meaning of life, if the end of life is death?

I argue in my book that death is the limit of life, that we can live freely and lovingly, at once justly and compassionately, solely within the limit of death. The rules of the game of life dictate that we cannot play it without knowing that it comes to an end. Are there, then, winners and losers, the saved and the damned? Indeed, the idea of death as life's paradox allows me to explore the fundamental issues of existence within the tradition of what I call biblical (i.e., Jewish and Christian) thinking, at once ontologically and historically. How are we to understand the biblical idea of eternal life, of the covenantal relationship of human beings and God? Who, indeed, is God that human beings are so mindful (or, not infrequently in modernity, so dismissive) of Him? What are we to understand by human salvation, the kingdom of God, the last judgment, the resurrected Lord?

In dealing with fundamental issues of biblical ontology my methodology is explicitly and systematically hermeneutical, consistent with my earlier publications. Thus, I make central to my interpretive study the textual exegesis of key sections of the Bible, at once Jewish and Christian, together with key works of modern literature. In my interpretation of texts, at once sacred and secular, I make use of critical principles of ontology and history that are fundamental to modern philosophy, above all, as found in Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard, together with Nietzsche. I argue that biblical thinking, in focusing on existence (both human and divine), is fundamentally philosophical. I argue further that modern philosophy, in demonstrating that existence (I follow Kant here) is at once necessary and universal, i.e., in proving or, in other words, justifying the existence no less of God than of human beings, is

fundamentally theological. Consequently, I show that we can develop a comprehensive conception of life and so also of death solely insofar as we learn to overcome the dualistic (idolatrous) opposition between philosophy and theology that continues today to falsify our understanding of not only the secular but also the religious, of reason no less than of faith.

Consequently, I undertake to show in my book, consistent with Jowett's demonstration more than a century and a half ago that the Bible is to be interpreted like any other (secular) text, how critically important it is for us today to learn to interpret any (secular) text like the Bible. For, just as God commands his people to love their neighbor as themselves, so we are subject to the hermeneutical imperative: interpret the letter of a text, whether sacred or secular, in the spirit that you want it to interpret you. There are no other studies known to me-- whether in the healing tradition of attending to the dying (e.g., Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying*) or in the intellectual tradition of attending to the existential issues raised by death (e.g., Becker's *The Denial of Death*, Choron's *Death and Western Thought* and *Death and Modern Man*, Ariès' *Western Attitudes toward Death*, or Stark's *The Consolations of Mortality: Making Sense of Death*, not to mention Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*)--that show how fundamentally important it is for us to situate our concerns with life and so also with death in the context of the hermeneutical reflection on the relationship between sacred and secular scripture.¹

I want to thank Adam Levine for inviting me to participate in the 11th Annual Senior College Symposium on Life and Death that was held in April, 2016 at the University of Toronto. He also brought to my attention a podcast on death in five parts: The Reckoning, Exit Plan, The Last Moment, The Wake, and After Life (www.ttbook.org/series/death). I am also grateful to Marc Egnal for taking me, in February of 2017, to the Sunday Flower Communion of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in San Miguel de Allende (Mexico). There, I learned about the Discussion Group that I attended two days later: "The end of life comes to us all. Are we prepared? How do we prepare?" I also thank friends and colleagues who brought to my attention books on death and/or who read sections of my manuscript and provided me with critical comments on them: Mark Cauchi, Lee Danes, Geri Das Gupta, John Elias, John Mahaffy, and Tom Taylor.

I also want to thank the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies at York University for the financial support it provided for the publication of my book.

Finally, I want, in particular, to thank Christopher Irwin, friend and former student, for having shared with me in an email letter his response to my chapter on Shakespeare. His reading of my chapter came about through the coincidence of my having finished my book at the same time that the Reading Group, to which both he and I belong, had returned to the late plays of Shakespeare. I suggested to my fellow Reading Groups members that, if they were interested in reading my Shakespeare chapter, I would be delighted to know their response to it. Because Chris in his letter so thoughtfully and engagingly indicates what it means to grow up with and through Shakespeare, I thought that it would be appropriate to include it as an Appendix to my book. He agreed. (I want to add that I slightly edited his letter and that the title that I gave to it in the Appendix is my own.)

Notes

¹ See Bibliography (Studies) regarding books whose authors examine, from a variety of academic perspectives, the role that death plays in our lives.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: LIFE BEFORE DEATH/LIFE AFTER DEATH— HISTORICO-ONTOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS¹

As I indicated in the Preface, I focus in my book on death as life's paradox, on death as the paradox of life, in order to explore fundamental questions about our human existence. These questions are at once philosophical, theological, ethical, personal, social, political, aesthetic, psychological.... Today, in calling them existential, we acknowledge (if not always directly or explicitly) that they are at once secular and religious, both ontological and historical. Indeed, a principal aim of my study is to show how fundamentally important it is for us to locate our discussion of existence, of what it means for us human beings to exist, in a context that is both philosophical and theological. To think, to be able to say with Descartes, I think, *ergo* I am, is philosophical precisely because the demonstration that to think is to exist and equally that to exist is to think is theological, at once historically and ontologically.² In simple terms, which I shall be amplifying and deepening throughout my study, there is no thinking outside of existence and no existence outside of thinking. To think is to prove, to demonstrate, in other words, to justify existence. To exist is to prove, to demonstrate and so to justify thinking.

We are, it is evident, already in the midst of the most fundamental ontological questions. I use the term "ontological" (together with "ontology") as a "neutral" bridge that allows me to move freely between philosophy and theology (between the secular and the religious). What, indeed, do we mean by demonstration, by proof? We shall find, following the philosophers whose "demonstrations" I make central to my present study (as to my previous studies)—Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard—that there is a fundamental difference between the proofs that are essential to the logic of the natural sciences and the proofs that are essential to the logic of the human sciences, the humanities, including the fine arts, which concentrate on what it means to exist. Thus, Descartes, in distinguishing between extended substance (what Kant calls the things of

possible experience) and thinking substance (in Kant, free subjects who actually exist as things in themselves), makes it evident that the logic of existential demonstration, as true to thinking, involves and expresses doubt, not the law of contradiction. We have arrived, as we shall continue to arrive throughout my book, at the paradox that defines modernity. What Descartes shows us is that to think—to reason, to meditate, to question, to assess, to evaluate, to measure, to judge to critique...—is to doubt. But, as my readers know, the stunning paradox that Descartes then reveals to us is that in doubting, in doubting absolutely everything that there is, there is one thing that I, the thinker, cannot doubt in doubting everything, which is that I, the doubting thinker, I the thinking doubter, exist. To doubt existence, to question existence is to affirm my existence, in other words, to have faith in my existence. But readers also know that Descartes proceeds yet further to show us that, in doubting absolutely everything there is in existence, there is another thing whose existence we prove, or affirm, and that is the existence of God (in modernity often called the other). What since Kant we call the ontological proof of the existence of God Spinoza formulates at the beginning of his *Ethics* as follows: There is one thing that I cannot think without its necessarily existing, and that is God. Central to the paradox of doubt, of the ontological argument, is that it involves the relationship (the dialectic) of the self as the other of itself. I think/I exist are at one and the same time identical and different, both self and other.

Two huge issues, among others, have thus emerged, those involving existence and proof (demonstration). The issue of existence, we see, engages the existence of self and other, of man³ and God. Who is man, the psalmist asks, in addressing God, that you are mindful of him? Today, philosophers of existence, those whose existence involves the most profound doubt and thus also, it turns out, the most profound faith, ask: who is God that man is mindful of him? What is the other, who is this other whose existence is thought by the self to be absolutely necessary? In the terms of my study, we see that existence involves, ontologically, the existence of both man and God, that existence is at once human and divine. We also see how closely our second issue, that involving proof or demonstration, is connected with the issue of existence.

I want to make two points regarding proof at this point. First, Descartes explicitly distinguishes what I shall call the law of doubt (that proving existence) from the law of contradiction, which, together with the laws of identity and the excluded middle, is the law underlying all of Greek philosophy (together with Greek art, both written and figural) and is altogether consistent with the domination of Greek life by fate (*moira*),

together with chance (*tyche/fortuna*). In his *Metaphysics* Aristotle provides a systematic exposition of Socratic inquiry. To seek to know the good is to demonstrate that you are ignorant of that which you seek. All seeking, all desire, all endeavor, all human thinking in the Greek world is undertaken in ignorance of the good, of what the good is in itself. What it is that the law of contradiction demonstrates is that something either exists or does not exist. It is impossible for something both to exist and not to exist at the same time, that is, to be in two different places at the same time. This seems evident. I cannot be, at one and the same time, at home in my study writing this sentence on my computer and attending a concert downtown. I can report to a friend one or the other. But is my report true? How would I prove it? As Hume shows us, there is no fact whose non-existence is a contradiction. Whatever is may not be. While, according to substantial reports, the sun has risen every day (since the beginning of time), there is no proof, either empirical (inductive) or logical (deductive), that the sun will rise tomorrow. I say that I exist. But I may be deluded. There is no fact, there is nothing in existence whose non-existence is a contradiction. In short, the law of contradiction, in being consistent with Socratic ignorance of the existence of the good (of the good of existence), cannot prove whether something exists or does not exist, whether I exist or I do not exist. Thus, Aristotle shows, in summarizing the whole history of Greek philosophy, that things are known in two ways, either in regard to ourselves (consistent with Protagoras' sophistic philosophy that man is the measure of all things) or in themselves. In other words, the world (being, existence) is divided between the changing many (appearances) and the unchanging one (being), between the mortal and the immortal, between the in-finite (that which is not at one with its end) and the finite (that which is at one with its end). It is no wonder, then, that Aristotle defines god/*theos* (who is unknown by and unknowable to him) as thought thinking itself.

I elaborate the critical (the unthinkable!) difference between the ontological argument for existence and the law of contradiction, between Cartesian doubt and Socratic ignorance, between two completely different concepts of proof or demonstration, because it involves the fundamental distinction that is central to my study. Descartes was well aware that, in replacing the law of contradictory logic with the existential logic of doubting, he was rejecting the very basis of Greek metaphysics. He also knew that the God whose necessary existence he demonstrates is the God of Christianity (i.e., the God of the Bible, at once Hebrew and Christian, as I shall explain further on in my Introduction). But what is not so clear is whether Descartes recognized that the existential proof of philosophy is fundamentally theological, whether he recognized, in other words, that

philosophy, the philosophy of existential proof, was historically biblical or that theology, the *logos*, the word, the logic of God, embodied the ontology of philosophy. Still, what counts for us here is that, in learning from Descartes that philosophy and theology together affirm the necessary existence of God no less than of man, we come to understand that to think existence involves not only reason but also faith.

Having seen that thinking, or reason, involves the most fundamental doubt about and so, too, it turns out, the most fundamental faith in existence, we shall also discover that faith (faith in God) no less involves the most fundamental doubt, questioning, existential angst—from Job’s refusal to accept the prudential counsel of his three friends, together with that of Elihu, that his suffering is due to God’s righteous punishment of his sins, to Jesus’ anguished cry on the Roman cross: My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? The point that I am making here, in my introductory comments, is that, just as reason is not, at base, theoretical, abstract, or scientific but practical and so the practice of thinking, so faith is not blind adherence to dogmatic pronouncements (whether divine or human) but rational (thinking) adherence to and affirmation of the truth of loving God above all others and your neighbor as yourself. The reader, I suspect, may already have anticipated that there is a parallel between doubt and death. Just as doubt affirms faith in existence, so death, we shall see, is central to the affirmation of life, to faith in life.

Before, however, directly addressing death as life’s paradox, I want to point out that, in addition to the fundamental difference between Greek philosophy, as contradictory ignorance of the good, and modern philosophy, as paradoxical knowledge of the good of existence, of existence of the good, there is another difference that is also fundamental to my study. This is the difference between the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible (between what Christians, and also Jews, prior to our present time, called the Old Testament and the New Testament), between Judaism and Christianity, between, we might say, the God of Moses (of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) and the God of Jesus (who, as the Christ, the Messiah, is promised in the Hebrew tradition as the one who is both God and man, the one whom Kierkegaard calls the God-man). We are here in the presence, at one and the same time, of the contradictory difference between Jerusalem and Athens, between Greek philosophy and biblical theology, and of the paradoxical difference, within Jerusalem, between Judaism, as at once philosophical and theological, and Christianity, as equally philosophical and theological.

Let me here simply note that Spinoza, in his *Theologico-Philosophical Treatise* (published in Latin in 1670), comprehensively and systematically

finds his biblical hermeneutics on two principles. First, he shows that both the Old Testament and the New Testament (these are the terms he uses) rest on the principle of *caritas*: on love, on not doing to your neighbor what you do not want your neighbor to do to you. In fact, he explicitly writes in the *Ethics* (published in Latin in 1677) that what he calls there the *rationis dictamina*, the dictates of reason, are founded on the principle (the law) of *caritas*. Second, Spinoza writes in the *T-PT* that the “separation” or difference between philosophy and theology is such that neither of them can be derived from, that neither of them is based on, the other. In other words, philosophy is not the *ancilla*, the handmaiden, of theology, in the tradition of St. Thomas Aquinas; and theology is not ancillary to philosophy, in the tradition of Moses Maimonides. The very difference between philosophy and theology is that they are both based on *caritas*, on the divine command to love your neighbor as yourself.

The disclosure that the difference between Christianity and Judaism involves a difference totally different from the difference between Athens and Jerusalem has enormously important hermeneutical implications. It is no less the case that the difference between reason and faith, when both are understood to be founded on the Word of God as the command to love your neighbor as yourself, has infinite ramifications. They branch everywhere interpretively as the critique of pure reason, to recall Kant, who famously wrote that he had to deny (negate/cancel out: *aufheben*) knowledge in order to make room for faith. So Kant undertakes to prove in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (first ed. 1781, second ed. 1787) that, if we are to possess reliable knowledge of things of possible appearance, that is, of natural objects as known to us empirically through the senses, then we must renounce, unto eternity, ever possessing knowledge of the thing in itself. In simple terms, methodologically systematic knowledge of nature, as found in that exponentially growing body of natural data of the science of nature, which began with the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century and continues today unabated, rests on premises that are not natural or objective but transcendental and subjective. The scientific knowledge of nature, of the objects of nature, rests on (presupposes) the transcendental reason of subjects. Kant famously shows in the Preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* that, so long as thinkers (whether their field of study was epistemology, metaphysics, or ethics) continued to presuppose that human reason rested on objective knowledge of the thing itself, that is, that subjects were dependent on knowledge of objects, then, contradictory ignorance, both of nature and of God, was the result. It is only when Copernicus, he writes, discovered that “he did not make good progress in the explanation of the celestial motions if he

assumed that the entire celestial host revolves around the observer, tried to see if he might not have greater success if he made the observer revolve and left the stars at rest.”⁴ Kant writes further that “the invisible force (of Newtonian attraction) that binds the universe... would have remained forever undiscovered if Copernicus had not ventured, in a manner contradictory to the senses yet true, to seek for the observed movements not in the objects of the heavens but in their observer.”⁵

These are heady matters. My point is, as central to the hermeneutical project that constitutes my book on the relationship between death and life in the biblical tradition of thinking existence, that the distinction that Kant makes between subject and object, between mind and matter, between transcendental reason as the categorical practice of subjects and empirical knowledge of objects, between freedom and nature, is fundamentally biblical in origin, both historically and ontologically. One way of putting the paradox that is involved here is that “nature” is a category of mind. Nature does not know itself as natural. The very category of nature is a product of the mind. We cannot know what nature is in itself. In order for us to know nature as an object of possible experience, as an object of the natural sciences, we must distinguish between the empirical knowledge of objects and the transcendental, that is, the practical work or effort (what Spinoza calls *conatus*) of subjects. Indeed, Kant writes, in what is perhaps the most extraordinary sentence in the entire history of philosophy, that we subjects cannot know as an object, as an object of nature, that by which we do know the objects of nature.⁶ In a complete reversal of the Aristotelian concept of nature (which was under continuous attack from the later Middle Ages into the seventeenth century), the cosmos does not circle, as a finitely divine object, around in-finite man. Rather, it is man, as the transcendental observer of nature, who infinitely circles about the finite cosmos.

Consistent with the fundamental difference between the concepts of finite and infinite in the Greek and biblical traditions, Kant, like Spinoza earlier, radically formulates this critical distinction in bluntly succinct terms. But, first, let me recall the philosophical understanding of the opposition between the in-finite and the finite that underlies Greek thought and life. I shall broadly make use of the formulations of this opposition that we find in Plato, but his formulations differ in no fundamental way from those of the thinkers who either preceded him (Socrates, together with the pre-Socratics) or succeeded him (Aristotle, together with the skeptics, Stoics, and Epicureans). The opposition in the Greek world between the in-finite and the finite is precisely that between appearance and reality, the changing and the unchanging, the mortal and the immortal,

body and soul, the good as it appears to me and the good in itself. Indeed, we may say that the opposition between the in-finite and the finite is the difference between death (as mortal, bodily existence) and life (as the immortality of the soul). We can well understand, then, that Socrates informs us in the *Phaedo* that, in order for the philosopher to know the good (to possess wisdom), he must be dead to life. Indeed, Plato makes it clear to us that to know the good is to be the good (consistent with, as I indicated earlier, Aristotle's definition of *theos*/god as thought thinking itself). It is no wonder, then, that *philo-sophia* reflects the law of contradiction, par excellence. To be a friend of wisdom, to love wisdom, to desire wisdom is to demonstrate your in-finite ignorance of wisdom. It is one of the ironies of the ancient Greeks (as unknown to them!) that it is the sophists who in, bearing the mantle of *sophia*, demonstrate, consistent with Socrates, that they are ignorant of that of which they speak.

The reversal in modern, i.e., in biblical, thought of the Greek opposition between the in-finite and the finite, between the changing mortal and the unchanging immortal, is absolute. Indeed, Hegel shows us that the finite is contradictory, that we can know the finite solely within our infinite self-consciousness. Hegel thus simply reformulates Kant's critical insight that finite objects conform to the infinite mind of subjects (as things in themselves), not the (infinite) mind of subjects to finite objects. Whence it follows that that by which we (infinite subjects) know the finite objects of nature we cannot know as we know those finite objects. The percipient reader will doubtlessly have begun to anticipate the radical conclusion towards which I am moving. Precisely because the distinction between subject and object is identical with the distinction between infinite and finite, the infinite is a category no less of human existence than of divine existence. I shall take up this issue shortly.

But, now, I want to invoke the radical formulation of the critical distinction between subject and object, between infinite and finite, that we find in Kant, as also in Spinoza. Kant writes that the "only objects of a practical reason are ... those of the *good* and the *evil*" and as such involve desire and aversion. Good or evil, he continues, "always signifies a reference to the *will* insofar as it is determined by the *law of reason* to make something its object; for, it is never determined directly by the object and the representation of it, but is instead a faculty of making a rule of reason the motive of an action (by which an object can become real). Thus, good or evil is, strictly speaking, referred to actions,... and if anything is to be good or evil absolutely..., it would be only the way of acting, the maxim of the will, and consequently the acting person himself as a good or evil human being, that could be so called, but not a thing."

Kant summarizes his argument that good and evil originate with the subject (the acting human being) and are not objects independent of human beings in terms of an either/or. Either “we represent to ourselves something as good when and *because we desire (will) it*, or...we desire something *because we represent it to ourselves as good*....” He repeats: “either desire is the determining ground of the concept of the object as good, or the concept of the good is the determining ground of desire (of the will)....”⁷ Indeed, Kant refers to what he calls “the paradox of method” in his critique of practical reason precisely because it is the moral law that determines the concepts of good and evil, not the concepts of good and evil the moral law.⁸ We may say, in elemental terms, that desire (will, practical reason, thinking, action) is the principle (the origin) of good and evil, that good and evil do not exist outside of human desire. Spinoza’s formulation of the relationship between desire and the good (together with the evil), consistent with that of Kant, is simplicity itself. He writes, in the context of observing that the very essence of man is appetite and that desire refers to the self-consciousness on the part of human beings of their appetite: “we neither strive for, nor will, nor want, nor desire anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary, we judge something to be good because we strive for, will, want, and desire it.”⁹ It is human desire that determines good (and evil). It is not good (or evil) in itself that determines human desire.

How we conceive of the relationship between desire and the good, together with what is evil, that is, whether good and evil adhere in the subject or in the object, whether, in short, good and evil are subjective or objective, has enormously important, hermeneutical consequences for how we interpret texts, whether sacred or secular. I shall outline here what are surely the two most dramatic consequences. First, whether objects depend freely on the desire of self-conscious subjects or whether the desire of subjects depends blindly on objects is precisely the difference between Jerusalem and Athens, between the Bible and Greek philosophy. Let us recall Plato, according to whom, as we saw, to desire knowledge of the good is to demonstrate that you, as mortal and changing (appearance), are ignorant of what the good is in itself as immortal and unchanging (form). To be conscious of your desire to know the good, with Socrates, is to acknowledge that all desire to know the good is undertaken in ignorance of the good. Where human consciousness is present, there the good in itself is unknown. Where the good in itself is known, there human consciousness is absent (for we remember that to know the good is to be identical with the good). In the Greek world, all desire is in contradiction with itself, and all good is identical with itself. The middle—all mediation, relationship,

reconciliation, communication, interaction—between desire and the good is excluded.¹⁰

While the first consequence of how we understand the relationship between desire and the good involves the fundamental distinction between Greek philosophy and modern philosophy, with modern philosophy understood to be biblical in origin, at once historically and ontologically, the second consequence bears directly on how we interpret the Bible—philosophically, theologically, ethically, aesthetically.... Kant and Spinoza have shown us that the good depends on desire, not desire on the good. It is human beings who, through their will or desire (what Kant calls practical reason: the practice of reason), determine what is good and evil in their lives, the very content of morality, i.e., all moral ends. But, thus, we find ourselves faced with a fundamental question. How are we to understand the Bible and its theology? What is the *logos*, the word of God? What is the relationship between God and man? If it is the desire, the will, of human beings that determines for them the good—the good life—and not the good (in itself) that determines their life for them, who, then, is God? Is not man subject to the will of God? Is it not the word of God that determines the end of man? Does not scripture, both Hebrew and Christian, reveal the way of the Lord, his commands, to be the end of all human beings? Yet, Spinoza writes in the Appendix of Part 1 of the *Ethics*, where he provides the definitive critique for all time of Aristotelian teleology (as the good that moves all things blindly to their end but that in the end remains unmoved by all things), that the prejudice (pre-judgment) that underlies all other human prejudices is that “men commonly suppose that all natural things act as they do on account of an end; indeed, they maintain as certain that God himself directs all things to some certain end....”¹¹ Earlier in Part 1 of the *Ethics* Spinoza had already observed that men commonly “maintain that God does all things for reason of the good. For they seem to place something outside of God, which does not depend on God, to which God attends... in what he does, and at which he aims, as at a certain goal. This is nothing other than to subject God to fate, than which nothing more absurd can be stated concerning God....”¹²

Who, then, I ask yet again, is God, the God of the Bible, the God of Jews and Christians (I do not consider in my book the God of Muslims), if they hold, consistent with Kant and Spinoza, that it is their desire that determines the good, including God as their good, and that, consequently, it is not God who determines the good of human desire? To repeat, if it is human desire that determines, that creates, that is the very origin or principle of all good and evil, how, then, are we to understand the God of the Bible as the creator, as the savior, of human beings? What is creation?

What is salvation? What is the covenant that God establishes with his people? Who is this God whose word is revealed to his people (and, consequently, to all the peoples of the earth) through his prophets and who is revealed as the word incarnate in the man Jesus, first to Jews, but also to gentiles, to recall St. Paul's formulation? Our questions multiply endlessly. If the desire of human beings, if the content of human desire, is centered on existence and if, as we have seen, there is a fundamental distinction between finite objects and infinite subjects, between things and persons, then it follows that it is infinite Spirit that unites human and divine subjects whose existence as infinite absolutely distinguishes them from finite objects or things. Yet human beings, as embodied subjects, die. What, then, are we to understand by the eternity of God, the eternity of divine Spirit, the eternity of divine life? In Genesis, we are told that God creates man and woman in his likeness or image. What does it mean to be like God, to be, to bear the very image of God? The Bible never suggests that we know, could know, or would want to know what God is in himself. Indeed, in Deuteronomy we read that Moses informed his people: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God; but the things that are revealed [by God] belong to us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of the law." (Deut. 29.29) It is evident, then, that the God-relation that constitutes the Bible—in the double meaning of relation as at once community and communication—is uniquely and universally focused on human beings.

We also learn in Genesis that, as God prepares to expel Adam and Eve from the paradisiacal Garden of Eden into the covenantal life of conception (bodily and spiritual), labor, and death, he informs Adam that man is like him in knowing good and evil. More questions arise, subsequently. Does not knowledge of good and evil signify that we can know the good solely in acknowledging and addressing the evil that we have done? What does it mean, then, for God to know not only good but also evil? If one can know good solely in knowing, in being responsible for overcoming, evil, is it possible for God, in whose likeness man and woman are created, not himself to be a sinner? If not only death but also knowledge of evil, or sin, are central to the good of human existence, what then are we to understand by divine perfection? In what sense, then, can Jesus, man and God, at once human and divine, be understood to be sinless, or perfect, as is proclaimed so widely in Christendom? Yet, Spinoza points out to us that, because reality (existence) and perfection are identical, existence itself always involves (paradoxically) a transition (historically and ontologically) either to more perfect (i.e., to more ample and loving) existence or to less perfect (i.e., to less ample and loving)

existence. I think, I desire, I will, *ergo* I exist—always yet more perfectly or less perfectly as a human being. It is existence (desire) that determines perfection (good), not perfection (good) existence.

I want to draw to the attention of the reader yet additional consequences of the concept of desire as the origin, the principle, of good and evil. Precisely because it is the subject (whether human or divine) who determines the content of good and of evil, because it is subjects, not objects, who are good or evil, loving or unloving, etc., “truth is subjectivity,” to recall the dramatic formulation of modernity that we find in Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846). The irony here is that in normal parlance today “subjective” signifies mere opinion (if not prejudice), while “objective” indicates a reasoned claim based on judicious assessment of the evidence. Still, because it is subjects who determine the truth of objects, and not vice-versa, it is the desire of subjects—what they will—that determines the good and evil of their actions. Kant famously distinguishes between good and evil in light of the categorical imperative: the command to treat our fellow human beings as things in themselves, as subjects, as ends or persons, and not merely as useful (instrumental) means, as objects or things. Thus, he writes in the introductory sentence of the first section of *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*: “It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it [angels, God?], that could be considered good [or evil] without limitation except a **good** [or **evil**] will.” He continues: Whatever gifts of nature or fortune human beings may possess, “they can also be extremely evil and harmful if the will which is to make use of the[m]...., and whose distinctive constitution is therefore called *character*, is not good.”¹³ It is precisely because it is the infinite desire or will (Spirit) of man that determines the good or evil of existence, whether it is a blessing or a curse, that all hell breaks out. There are no natural or objective, no finite bulwarks to which we can appeal as the standards of good and evil. What we have, all we have is our subjective desire or will, which, as the absolute or infinite principle of the good, is at the same time the absolute or infinite principle of all evil. Nature and fortune are always present in our lives, for good or for evil. But they are not good or evil in themselves. The question is, always: Are we responsible for them? What do we do about them? It is evident, yet again, that we broach, that we draw near the role that death, our own death and the death of others—together with the death of God?—plays in our life. If death, together with evil (sin), is central to the good of existence, to the existence of the good, then we ask yet again: can we truly conceive of divine or infinite life, of the life of God, as not also subject to the limits of death and of sin? Is not the

perfection of existence constituted, unto eternity, as the historical and ontological transition to ever more when not to ever less perfection? Can we in good faith conceive of existence, the perfection of existence, outside of death, outside of sin (evil)?

Having seen that, because human desire, human will, is the principle no less of evil than of good, *caritas* is ever so frequently replaced by the self-delusions that result in revenge and hatred on the part of human beings, it is timely to take up the issue of idolatry. There are no greater idols in Christendom than those of God (divine being) and of man (human being). The prophets constantly excoriate God's holy people for worshipping false gods or idols. The author of 1 John warns his readers: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world." (4.1) He concludes his letter with the admonition: "Little children, keep yourself from idols." (5.21) In my book I test the idolatrous spirits that have gone forth in the name of God and man.

I return, then, to the issue of interpretation that I introduced earlier. To interpret a text is to question it, to doubt it, to test it, to put it on trial as I, the reader, am also questioned and so made subject to doubt, tested, and put on trial by the text. To will to do unto others as you want others to do unto you is to be open to the test of love, to be vulnerable, to be subject to critique, to be willing to be put on trial and so to acknowledge your own error or sin, to make that transition to ever more perfect existence as a sinner the sole certainty of whose life is that it ends in death. In the more formal terms of a hermeneutical methodology I shall make critical use of the distinction that Kierkegaard posits between Christianity and Christendom. Christianity represents, we may say, the truth of scripture as founded on *caritas*, love of neighbor, to recall Spinoza. Christendom, on the other hand, represents what Kierkegaard calls baptized paganism, the rationalization of pagan values (ideas, concepts, doctrines) as Christian. To be clear on the fundamental difference between Christianity and Christendom I shall here provide one example of a doctrine that is fundamental to scripture and so to Christianity and yet is widely known, by both believers and non-believers, in its idolatrous version as transmitted for century after century in Christendom: the belief in eternal life as the immortality of the soul. I shall be brusque here, but I shall deal with this and related issues at length when I examine, in subsequent chapters, a variety of scriptural texts, both sacred (Jewish and Christian) and secular (modern). The biblical concept of eternal life, as found in both Jewish and Christian scripture, is not to be understood in the terms of the concept of the immortality of the soul that is found in Plato and Aristotle and that was

then transmitted historically, while a doctrine central to Neo-Platonism, in Christendom. I shall not deal with that history directly in my book, but it is the ever-present context for the idols of divine and human existence that have been so pervasive in Christendom.

Because hermeneutics involves us in a critique, a deconstruction, of the idols of Christendom, it is critically important, at once historically and ontologically, to distinguish systematically between paganism and idolatry. Pagans, and so the ancient Greeks, are not idolaters. They have no concept of good and evil, no concept of God as infinite perfection in whose image human beings are created. They have no knowledge of God as infinitely divine goodness, for indeed they are ignorant of what the good is in itself. Yes, we learn from Plato's dialogues that Socrates was condemned to death for, among other offenses, introducing false gods into the polis. But the real offense that Socrates committed was to demonstrate to his fellow Greeks that, because their lives were based on the law of contradiction, they were ignorant of the good. Right is might, as Democritus had shown years before. Consistent with what Aristotle and later Polybius demonstrate, political regimes reflect the power of the ruler, whether one (monarchy), few (aristocracy), or some (democracy). All rule involves the supremacy of one, of few, or of some over others. As Hegel observed when discussing ancient politics and ethics, the Greeks had no concept of the rule of all over all, what Kant calls the kingdom of ends (and the Bible the kingdom of God), in which its members, one and all, submit to the authority of the absolute rule of which they are themselves the authors (i.e., the people is sovereign).

Socrates did, indeed, reverse the heroic code of honor that it is better to kill than to be killed, that it is better to rule than to be ruled, which is the ethic that dominates both Greek epic and tragedy. He appears to have shocked his contemporaries with his teaching (as found in the *Gorgias*) that it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong, that it is better to have wrong done to you by others than to do wrong to others. In short, it is better to be killed than to kill. Still, both the heroic and the Socratic modes of political and ethical right presuppose that, in order for right to be done, wrong must equally be done. Right depends on wrong, as right depends on might. Wrong sanctifies right, as might justifies right. In order for the hero to do right, the other must be killed. In order for Socrates to do right to the other, the other must do wrong to him. In order for Socrates to be right, the other must be wrong.

Indeed, the contradiction that structures the relationship between right and wrong in the Greek world is manifest in the trial of Socrates and his condemnation to death. Precisely because right (together with wrong)

cannot be known in itself and so is known solely in regard to the one or to the other whose sophistic love of wisdom is, in either case, ignorance, not knowledge, of the good in itself, Socrates can be right only if wrong is done to him. It is no less the case that the Athenian polis, the majority of whose jury members condemn Socrates to death, can be in the right only if, in this case, Socrates is in the wrong. Socrates holds that all wrong is done in ignorance of the good (one cannot knowingly do evil: one cannot take responsibility for one's actions, good and bad). The polis agrees with Socrates that, because the good cannot be known in itself, right depends on the democratic rule of some over (the many) others. Socrates, together with his fellow Greeks from Achilles to Alexander the Great, has absolutely no conception of willing the good true for all, of doing unto others what you want others to do unto you. The principles of freedom, equality, and neighborliness (fraternity), of sin, repentance, reconciliation, and forgiveness, in short, *caritas*, are unknown in the pagan world of the Greeks. Democracy, as the rule of all over all, is unknown and unknowable in the ancient world, just as philosophy, in bearing the imperative to love your neighbor as yourself, is unknown in the ancient world.

I want to add here that death holds no more significance for Socrates than does life. At the end of the *Apology* he points out to his accusers that "death is a blessing, for it is one of two things: either the dead are nothing and I have no perception of anything, or it is, as we are told, a change and a relocating for the soul from here to another place."¹⁴ If death, he continues, is mere senselessness, then, it will simply be like a dreamless sleep. But if death is a change from living in body with the living to living in soul with the dead, then he will look forward, in spending his time with the famous heroes in the underworld, to "testing and examining people there, as I do here, as to who among them is wise, and who thinks he is, but is not.... Since a good man," Socrates observes further, "cannot be harmed either in life or in death" and since his *daimon*¹⁵ (the god within him, who, he told his accusers earlier, never tells him what to do but only what not to do) "did not oppose me at any point...[,] I go to die, you go to live. Which of us goes to the better lot is known to no one, except the god."¹⁶

It is important to keep in mind that, when Socrates states that the good man cannot be harmed either in life or in death, since his soul is immortal and unchanging, the good man is precisely the one who knows that he does not know what the good is. Indeed, it is in the *Apology* that we learn that Socrates was informed by the Delphic Oracle of Apollo that he was the wisest man in Greece precisely because he knew that he was ignorant

of the good. Who, then, is the good man, the wise man, the philosopher? As I indicated earlier, we learn in the *Phaedo* that the philosopher, the lover of wisdom, is the one whose death simply effects a separation of his unchanging, immortal soul from his changing, mortal body. Indeed, the most shocking idea that Socrates (through Plato¹⁷) brought to the Greeks was that the difference between mortal men and immortal gods simply reflected the contradictory opposition between mortal and immortal, the changing and the unchanging, and appearance and reality that structures all of Greek thought and life, both historically and ontologically, from Homer to the end of the Hellenistic period. The gods in Homer are shown to be no different from human beings in their ignorance of the good. Socrates demonstrates that men, in possessing immortal souls, are no different from the gods in their ignorance of the good. While we read in the *Republic* that the souls of men containing different degrees of good and bad receive different degrees of punishment in the underworld, this is not, logically, strictly possible. For the soul, as immortal and unchanging, cannot be affected (changed) by anything changing or mortal. At the end of the *Republic* Plato bans the poets (who are ignorant of the good in itself) from the republic of good men that exists solely in the contradictory word of “one change” whereby philosopher and king (right and might) are identified. But in the Greek world there is no possible reconciliation of the contradictory opposition between Parmenides and Heraclitus, between the one as unchanging and the changing as not one—except in the contradictory word of “one change” that is said in the *Republic* to usher in the regime of the philosopher-king. Indeed, the republic, which is described as existing solely in the contradictory word of “one change,” provides special sanctuary for the Oracle of Delphic Apollo that became widely known in Hellenistic Greece for speaking out of both sides of its mouth at the same time. The idea of “one change,” as based on the law of contradiction, is forever contradictory, for the one is unchanging and the changing is many and not one. You cannot step into the same river twice, Heraclitus taught. But you cannot step into the same river even once, since all motion, all action, as both Parmenides and Heraclitus teach, in their opposition to each other, is mere appearance, without reality.¹⁸

Yet, there is one change that, as the practice of paradox, as the paradox of practice, brought ancient Greek (and Roman) culture to its end: the conversion of Athens to Jerusalem. How this “one change” occurred we shall never know, although we have the testimonies of profound Christian thinkers like Aurelius Augustinus Hipponensis, the pagan thinker Augustine from Hippo (in North Africa), who recounts in his *Confessions* the story of his conversion from paganism to Christianity (from the point

of view of having already converted to Christianity). As with the miraculous conversion of Abraham from pagan contra-diction to faith in the Word of God as paradox (para-doxa: beyond Socratic opinion), of which he becomes, consequently, the father, as related in Genesis 12, there is “nothing” in paganism which can ever provide the explanatory ground for conversion to the truth of the one God who is all in all. For the creation of Spirit is always from nothing, from nothing that is not always already (historically and ontologically) Spirit. There is nothing in the pagan world of finite nature that can explain the emergence of infinite Spirit. Indeed, it is infinite Spirit, Hegel tells us, that is the true miracle of life. I shall be examining the concept of miracle later in my study. But let me note here that, when Gloucester, in *King Lear*, welcomes what he anticipates to be his fall from the Cliff of Dover to his death, yet finds to his astonishment that he still lives, his son Edgar tells him that his life is a miracle. The paradox of miracle is that, while we human beings do not and cannot abrogate the laws of nature (e.g., the law of gravity)—we all die as natural beings—the life of infinite Spirit is not grounded in and is not explicable on the basis of the laws of nature.

The “one change” is repeated paradoxically, at once historically and ontologically, from the beginning to the end of the Bible, from alpha to omega, from the beginning to the end of modernity, and thus from creation *ex nihilo*—to the covenant, which is old only insofar as it is renewed eternally; to Christ, whose death and resurrection constitute the one change that counts for Christians in their lives; and, finally, to the “one change” that constitutes modernity in the prophetic words of Descartes and Nietzsche. Descartes tells us at the beginning of his first “Meditation” that, because of the “large number of falsehoods” to which he had been exposed since childhood, “I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and to start again right from the foundations....”¹⁹ (p 12) In other words, we must, at least once in our life, doubt everything, indeed, we must even suspect, Descartes writes, that the God in whom we have believed is “some malicious demon” who “has employed all his energies in order to deceive me.”²⁰ (15) But what we learn, consequently, is that, as St. Augustine makes clear to us in his refutation of the ancient skeptics, if I am deceived, at least I know that I who am deceived exist.²¹ So Descartes shows us, as we have seen, that all doubt, all despair (like that of Gloucester), proves (justifies) the existence of the one who doubts. To doubt the existence of God is to demonstrate faith in existence itself.

Nietzsche, for his part, attaches to the last book that he wrote (1888) prior to collapsing into insanity (in January, 1889), *Ecce Homo*—Behold

the Man (who is God)—the following epigraph: “How One Becomes What One Is.”²² In uniting being one and becoming one, Nietzsche shows us that to become the one person you are is to be the one person you become. It is evident, recalling Spinoza, that to exist perfectly as the one person you simultaneously become and are is to make the eternal transition either to more perfect or to less perfect existence. It is not, then, surprising to discover that in *The Gay Science* (1882/1887) Nietzsche distances himself from the positive assessment of the ancient Greeks that he had made, when under the influence of Wagner and Schopenhauer, in his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). In the aphorism entitled *The Dying Socrates* Nietzsche now calls “ridiculous and terrible” the “last word” of Socrates who, when going calmly to his death among his friends, said—“O Crito, I owe a cock to Asclepius.” What Socrates meant, Nietzsche continues, “for those who have ears: ‘O Crito, *life is a disease* [which the god of medicine cured]’... Socrates *suffered life!* And then he still revenged himself—with his veiled, gruesome, pious, and blasphemous saying.... Alas, my friends, we must overcome even the Greeks!”²³

Before returning directly to the issue of the relationship between paganism and idolatry, I want, first, to be sure that my readers understand the importance of distinguishing, with absolute clarity, between the ideas of good and evil (right and wrong) as held in the Greek (pagan) world and in the biblical world. Such is the very same distinction that we find in these two worlds regarding life and death. It won’t come as a surprise, I am sure, that, once again, we are in the presence of the critical difference between contradiction and paradox. Because, in the Greek world, there is only ignorance, and not knowledge, of the good, wrong is also unknown and unknowable. Socrates, we may say, is condemned to death because he is ignorant of the good, while he condemns his accusers for the wrong that they do him for also being ignorant of the good. The only resolution of this contradiction—the only solution to the Gordian knot of pagan contradiction—is to slice through it with a sword (as did Aaron Burr, who was both a US senator and a US vice-president, in killing Alexander Hamilton in a duel whose revenge mode of kill-or-be-killed justice would be outlawed in democracies). The simple but profound difference between these two worlds, Greek and biblical, is that in the Greek world, because all life, at once ethical and political, is lived in ignorance of the good, all wrong is a product of ignorance for which no one can take responsibility. In the biblical world, in contrast, because human beings are responsible for knowing the good, they no less bear responsibility for knowing evil, the evil that they do. Whereas, then, in the Greek world, sin is ignorance, to

invoke the description of Socrates that we find in Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death* (1849), in the biblical world sin is knowledge. There is no sin without knowledge (of sinning). There is no knowledge without (knowingly) sinning. The paradox of sin, of evil, then, is that it is only in and through sin that we deepen our knowledge of, our responsibility for, the good, just as we shall see throughout my study that it is only in dying every day but in not dying today, as Edgar tells the Duke of Albany in *King Lear*, as we shall see in Chapter 6, that we deepen our knowledge of life.

Yet, it is precisely because sin, or evil, is so deeply intertwined with good, because death is so deeply intertwined with life, that false spirits go forth in the world as idols. We shall see that Paul expresses his horror in his Letter to the Romans to having learned that there are members of the Christian community in Rome who have perverted the teaching of Jesus that he has come to save the sinners (those of good faith), and not the righteous (those of bad faith), into the practice of sinning, of doing evil, in order to be saved. There is no life without death, no salvation without sin, no good without evil. How easy it is, then, to make life serve death, salvation sin, and good evil. Idolatry, we see, is at once ideological and practical. It is found no less in ideas (thought) than in practice (existence).

Still, it is important to be clear that, just as I do not come to praise the Greeks, I also do not come to condemn them. Because the ancient Greeks make no claims to know either good or evil, they commit no errors (they sin in ignorance of the good). It is in their guise that Pontius Pilate asks Jesus, who is reported in the Gospel of John to have told the Roman Prefect of Judaea (26-36 CE) that he comes bearing witness to the truth: "What is truth?" Jesus remains silent. We do, however, come to praise those in the biblical tradition who embody truth, knowledge of good and evil, in their scripture, both sacred and secular. We also come to condemn or, in other words, to provide a critique of those who offer false or idolatrous readings of scripture, again whether sacred or secular, in reducing Christianity to Christendom. In short, we ask with Montaigne: What do I know? We do know something. We know that we exist. The question then, always, is whether our knowledge is adequate to our existence, whether our existence is adequate to our knowledge. In the context of discussing the academic skeptics, those ancient philosophers who followed in the tradition of Plato's Academy, Montaigne again asks: "But how can they let themselves be inclined toward the likeness of truth, if they know not the truth? How do they know the semblance of that whose essence they do not know? Either we can judge absolutely or we absolutely cannot."²⁴ The ancient Greeks absolutely did not judge. In their

world the absolute is the immortal, unchanging, contradictory end the finite essence of which is known solely in and of itself. But in modern thought, whose essence is biblical, at once historically and ontologically, judgment is absolute. But, as is surely evident to all, how easily the concept of truth as absolute, as the Last Judgment or the Absolute Knowledge of Hegel, can be perverted into the absolutism of idolatry.

It is little wonder, then, that Hamlet, in pondering the paradox of existence in his to be or not to be soliloquy, concludes that conscience doth absolutely make cowards of us all. Consistent with Hamlet Kierkegaard observes in *Works of Love* that it was the infinite change that Christianity brought into the world that “made every human relationship between person and person a relationship of conscience.” (135) It is the modern hero who, in standing before his conscience as before his absolute judge, his infinite Lord, acknowledges that in the presence of truth there are no excuses, no evasions, no rationalizations. It is the modern hero who, in being the one for whom “the readiness is all” and who says “let be,” acknowledges that before his conscience he is the absolute coward (the sinner). How infinitely different he is from the ancient hero whose badge of valor is emblazoned with the death of the one opposite him! It is evident that the model of the modern hero is the knight of faith Abraham. In response to the test of existence to which God calls him, Abraham undertakes, in fear and trembling, the three-day journey to Mt. Moriah there to sacrifice to the God, in whom he has absolute faith, his son Isaac, for whom his love is absolute and who embodies the promise of eternal life that God has made to his chosen people.²⁵ Death is the absolute test of life! How we die is absolutely how we live.

I have entitled my introductory chapter—Life Before Death/Life After Death—in order to highlight the paradox, at once historical and ontological, of *before* and *after*. Life comes before or, in other words, precedes death. Yet, we live “before,” that is, in the presence of death. Death succeeds or comes after life. But is there any of us who does not believe that life continues after death? In what sense, however, do we live “after” death? What, we may ask further, is “the time of our lives”? We live minute by minute, year by year. Yet, the time of our lives is not measured in minutes or years. We say, with Descartes, I think—I will, I desire—*ergo*, I exist. In what sense, then, do we human beings “exist,” historically and ontologically, either before or after death? The time of our lives, both before and after death, is what scripture, at once sacred and secular, calls eternal life.

I undertake to show, in the chapters of the two following sections in my book on sacred scripture (the Bible) and on secular scripture (modern

literature), that the time of our lives before and after death is to be understood in terms of creation and covenant, the two biblical concepts that before all others anchor the ontology of existence, at once human and divine, in the time of history. Neither God nor human beings can exist or be understood to exist outside of the concepts, i.e., the practices, of creation and covenant. Eternal life, we shall find, is historical, both now and forever. Life is historically complete in and through the eternal existence of the single individual yet is always to be created anew in and through the covenant of eternal life in which the historical existence of the single individual takes place.

Saint Anselm, in formulating in the late eleventh century and so for the first time in history what would become known centuries later with Kant as the ontological argument, writes that God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived to exist—by the individual human being. We have already seen Spinoza, together with Descartes, define God as that which cannot be conceived (thought, doubted...)—by human beings—without existing necessarily. It is evident, consequently, that God does not exist outside of the concept—outside of the thought, will, desire, practice—of human beings as that than which they can think nothing greater. Indeed, it is evident that, just as human beings do not exist outside of the Word of God as that than which they can communicate nothing more profound, so God does not exist outside of the word of man as the communication that is at once sacred and secular. We see, consequently, that, if there were no human beings who demonstrated their existence in and through the *logos* as the communicative logic of the word—I think, *ergo* I exist—it is evident that God would not exist. But it is no less evident that human beings would not exist if in their ignorance they did not know that there is one thing they cannot think without necessarily existing as absolutely infinite, which is God.

Since, however, human beings are constantly tempted to reduce God to finite images of themselves or to raise themselves to finite images of God, they forever surround themselves with idols of God that are made in their own likeness and with idols of man that are made in the likeness of God. It becomes, then, critically important hermeneutically, as we shall see in the chapters that follow, to distinguish between spirit and letter, between infinite image (or metaphor) and finite idol (or simile). It is evident that God grows (or diminishes), historically, in amplitude through the transition on the part of human beings to ever more (when not to ever less) profound insight, as found, above all, in their sacred and secular *scriptura*, with “writing” here to be understood as the art of the word, the art of