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KNOWLEDGE, VIRTUE, AND ONTOTHEOLOGY:  
A KIERKEGAARDIAN (SELF-)CRITIQUE

INTRODUCTION

In his late journals of 1854-1855,<sup>1</sup> Søren Kierkegaard argues at some length that faith has “not an intellectual character but an ethical character.”<sup>2</sup> He juxtaposes this with the “Platonic-Aristotelian definition,” alternatively the “whole Greek philosophical pagan definition” of faith as *pistis*, or that portion of the divided line in book 6 of Plato’s *Republic* that still aspires to higher and better knowledge.<sup>3</sup> He faults St. Augustine and “the Alexandrians” (probably St. Clement and maybe Origen) for this, and he relies partly on Romans 1:5 where St. Paul invokes the “obedience of faith” as evidence that faith is an ethical state, since it is not merely a second-rate epistemic category but requires *obedience* in ways that epistemic categories, it seems, cannot. This has deep implications for the tradition in continental philosophy that follows, and in this paper I want to explore some ways that Kierkegaard’s own account of these things, and at times, that of others, can be subjected to an important critique coming from the virtue tradition.

Before beginning my brief paper, it may be worth mentioning that my own concerns in it stem from the continental tradition in philosophy, but I also have training in and deep exposure to the analytic tradition in philosophy. Both traditions have vices and virtues. Analytic philosophers are proud of rigor and clarity, at which they sometimes succeed. But sometimes they rely overmuch on symbolism when ordinary language arguments communicate at least as clearly. Continental philosophers usually see themselves within a long philosophical

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<sup>1</sup> Below I list the abbreviations I use when referencing Kierkegaard’s works: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, 2 vols. (vol. 1, *CUP*), ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); *Kierkegaard’s Journals and Notebooks* (*KJN*, with volume and page number), vols. 1-11, ed. by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Alastair Hannay, David Kangas, Bruce H. Kirmmse, George Pattison, Vanessa Rumble and K. Brian Söderquist (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2007-); *The Sickness unto Death* (*SUD*), trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, 7 vols. (*JP*, plus volume and entry number), ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong with Gregor Malantschuk (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967); *Søren Kierkegaard’s Skrifter*, vols. 1-55 (*SKS*, with volume, page number, notebook, and entry number), ed. by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Joakim Garff, Johnny Kondrup, et al. (Copenhagen: Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre and G.E.C. Gads Forlag 1997ff.); *Without Authority* (*WA*), ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); *Works of Love* (*WL*), ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> *SKS* 26, 616 / *Papir* 486 / *JP* 2, 1154.

<sup>3</sup> *SKS* 25, 432-434 / *NB30:57* / *JP* 1, 180.

tradition, and often they are right to complain about ahistorical approaches to philosophy that obscure their debts to the past or ignore them. But there has also been a somewhat lamentable tendency within continental philosophy to pen massive works that spawn their own cottage industry of specialized (and, if we are honest, rather obscure) literature.

The effort in this issue of the *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* is to bring together multiple ways of doing philosophy of religion, and specifically in the case of this paper, and the papers by Michael Kelly and John Greco, the analytic and continental traditions of philosophy of religion as they might engage debates concerning emotion and virtue. This general approach of “mashup philosophy of religion” holds out a good deal of promise, since the opposition between the two traditions is ultimately artificial (just try to explain the divide to a new philosophy student without instantly revealing your bias). We should, after all, desire clarity in argumentation and dogged pursuit of the truth, along with an acknowledgment that our position in this endeavor is greatly enhanced by the work of our philosophical ancestors. There are tendencies in philosophical method, to be sure, and there is no *a priori* need to disown one or the other. But the time when philosophers from one tradition could safely ignore the efforts of those in another for no better reason than prejudice is hopefully receding.

#### KIERKEGAARDIAN CONCERNS

As anyone with more than a passing acquaintance with the history of philosophy and theology can see, Kierkegaard’s view about the nature of faith in the previously noted passages does not occur in a philosophical, much less a theological, vacuum. In this section, I will give some indication of what I take to be some of Kierkegaard’s heritage and legacy that shows up in later continental philosophy, if only to indicate that an examination of his position has important repercussions to contemporary debates. Kierkegaard himself sees his concern about the proper status of faith as the position of St. Paul and “the Christian” position. Part of the idea here seems to be that Kierkegaard suspects a downgrading and watering-down of Christianity when he hears any sense of faith occupying a rung on a ladder. He is not interested in *improving upon* faith; he is interested in faithful obedience, and he does not see this as a matter of degree. No doubt he also suspects a Hegelian element of making Christian faith into “picture thinking” that should be surpassed by absolute knowing.<sup>4</sup> While Kant saw it necessary to deny knowledge to make room for faith,<sup>5</sup> he also saw presumption in the philosophical work of rationalists like Descartes. Kierkegaard, too, sees presumption when faith is relegated to an intellectual category. This reflects another of his stark juxtapositions, namely, the apostle and the genius. Although someone could be both, Kierkegaard (or at any rate, his pseudonym, H.H.) seems to think that St. Paul did not rank very high as far as

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<sup>4</sup> See G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 475. It may be worth noting that it is common to hear that Hegel took the insights of Kant and retrieved along with them some of the insights of Aristotle, who is clearly within Heidegger’s sights as a villain in the ontotheological story.

<sup>5</sup> See the Preface to the Second Edition, Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965), 29.

his genius was concerned.<sup>6</sup> What is decisive is his apostolic authority, and to praise him for his genius is missing the point that “Christianity is existential.”<sup>7</sup>

Many critiques of what is now called “ontotheology” display related concerns. Heidegger’s famous line that “Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god,”<sup>8</sup> reflects a sense that it is the life of the believer, the life of worship, that is lost when “God” becomes little more than an internal demand in one’s tidy philosophical system. As Calvin O. Schrag puts it, can a being of the sort we find in classical theistic arguments “sustain our concrete religious interests”?<sup>9</sup> While this is clearly part of Kierkegaard’s concern, and I do want to keep the focus on Kierkegaard if only for reasons of my own competence, nonetheless, I think it is worthwhile to appreciate the relevance his concern has in later philosophy.

While thinkers after the so-called “theological turn” in phenomenology take different paths in terms of how to answer the Heideggerian question of how the deity enters into philosophy,<sup>10</sup> they tend to share the sense that ontotheology, or the attempt to inscribe God within a system of philosophizing that has God entering into philosophy on our terms rather than God’s, is a serious mistake. Levinas, for instance, pointed away from Descartes’s proof for God’s existence, by which Descartes sought to become one of the “masters and possessors of nature” (and perhaps of God in some sense),<sup>11</sup> to the rupture of ordinary consciousness Descartes discovered in his thought of God, of the infinite. Despite his shortcomings, Descartes was astute enough to note, as does Levinas, that the thought of God, as infinite, must be somehow prior, in him, than the thought of the finite.<sup>12</sup> For Levinas, this meant that the infinite is “behind intentionality,”<sup>13</sup> and that the infinite, or God, is never able to come within our direct intentional consciousness (or it would be finite). In ways that at times recall Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous text *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Levinas argued that this desire always propelled us toward the other because the desire for the infinite that is ignited by this awakening to the infinite requires us not to remain stuck in the immanence of our finite selves; we must go outside of ourselves to the other. Nevertheless, as it concerns God, we can never thematize God, and there is no end in sight in Levinas to the way in which we are constantly called to the human other.

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<sup>6</sup> SKS 11, 97-98 / WA, 93-94.

<sup>7</sup> SKS 24, 259 / NB23:107 / JP 4, 3861.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics,” in *The Religious*, ed. John D. Caputo (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 67-75,74.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin O. Schrag, *God as Otherwise than Being* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 68.

<sup>10</sup> See Heidegger, “The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics,” 74.

<sup>11</sup> See part six of René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), 35.

<sup>12</sup> See part three of René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), p. 31 and Emmanuel Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 129-148, 137.

<sup>13</sup> See Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” 138.

When we consider this legacy as it gets transmitted to Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, we notice their shared concerns even while we can see their differences. In John D. Caputo's apt language, Marion "proposes a radical phenomenology of a saturating givenness, a phenomenological description of an event, or the possibility of an event, of bedazzling brilliance, given without being, visited upon us beyond comprehension, leaving us stunned and lost for words."<sup>14</sup> In contrast, Caputo notes that, for Derrida this event is "*never given*, that is always deferred."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, "the very idea of a Messiah who is never to show and whom we accordingly desire all the more is the very paradigm of deconstruction."<sup>16</sup> Again, while it is clear both are nervous about different types of things under the umbrella of a suspicion of ontotheology, they both seem to share the overarching concern expressed by Kierkegaard.

At this point it is worth noting that Kierkegaard's own worries about faith as existential, which I have been suggesting can be translated into worries about ontotheology, though perhaps not exhausted by them, are not simply confined to faith being *an* ethical category, but rather to faith being a *particular sort of ethical category*. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, the Kierkegaardian pseudonym Anti-Climacus writes "the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith,"<sup>17</sup> calling this "one of the most decisive definitions for all Christianity." Why, one might wonder, is this so decisive? If we turn to Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*, some answers may await us. In that important text, Kierkegaard decries both "habit"<sup>18</sup> and "merit"<sup>19</sup> for reasons that may be significant for us to consider.

Kierkegaard sees love as only enacted when it is unconditional; a participation in the love of God. God's love is eternal and unconditional, and our participation in it should reflect that. There are many impostors when it comes to Christian love, but there is only one genuine article, namely, unconditional love and it comes through the submission of faith and the immediate response of love. Since love must be unconditional, it cannot await any particular characteristics that it might deem lovely or not. It must love in response to the command "you *shall* love." Only by love becoming a duty, says Kierkegaard, can it truly be unconditional and independent. Kierkegaard writes "only eternity's *you shall* – and the listening ear that wants to hear this shall – can save you from habit."<sup>20</sup> Kierkegaard associates habit with the deadening of zeal and ardor, whereas he sees truly Christian love as a pure response to the command of God to love the neighbor. This command is either heeded or it is not, and there seems little room for degree here. The similarity to Martin Luther, with his protests against Aristotle and the whole scholastic tradition, is, I think, not accidental.

In his *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*, Luther writes "For an act to be meritorious, either the presence of grace is sufficient, or its presence means

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<sup>14</sup> See John D. Caputo, "Apostles of the Impossible: On God and the Gift in Derrida and Marion," in *God, The Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 185-222, 185.

<sup>15</sup> Caputo, "Apostles of the Impossible," 185.

<sup>16</sup> Caputo, "Apostles of the Impossible," 186.

<sup>17</sup> SKS 11, 196 / SUD, 82.

<sup>18</sup> SKS 9, 43-45 / WL, 36-37.

<sup>19</sup> SKS 9, 378 / WL, 385.

<sup>20</sup> SKS 9, 44 / WL, 37.

nothing."<sup>21</sup> The idea here seems to be that merit is either totally accomplished by grace, or it is not accomplished at all. Indeed, there seems no need to tack on a concept of personal virtue here,<sup>22</sup> since, in the lapidary phrasing of the Lutheran World Federation, righteousness is "always complete."<sup>23</sup> The suggestion of an immediacy in grace that would be in tension with dispositions and virtues of a person's own is further corroborated by Luther's statement in Thesis 41 of the same disputation that "Virtually the entire *Ethics* of Aristotle is the worst enemy of grace."<sup>24</sup>

Kierkegaard takes the same intuition to be effective against the very notion of merit itself. Twice, in *Works of Love*, he attacks merit,<sup>25</sup> but he also indicates that we are put in a kind of infinite "debt" by love, one from which we should never seek relief. This seems to be because we should never dwell on ourselves in love, thinking that we have perhaps made a "part-payment" on the debt.<sup>26</sup> Rather, our debt is itself the blessed life of love in which there is no room for comparison among lovers. For my part, I find the immediacy of love in Kierkegaard to be paralleled in some interesting ways by the way we are held hostage by the other in Levinas, and must respond to the call of the other in the face of our neighbor.<sup>27</sup> My goal in this section has been merely to outline what I take to be some Kierkegaardian worries about the right sort of understanding of Christian faith, and to point to ways in which the view Kierkegaard holds is significant in terms of its impact on later thought and debt to earlier thought, especially in the continental philosophical tradition. In the next section, I will subject these views to some scrutiny even while I hope to keep in step with some things that remain Kierkegaardian in spirit.

#### A KIERKEGAARDIAN (SELF-)CRITIQUE

What we've seen thus far is that Kierkegaard's insistence upon faith as an existential, and not an intellectual, category seems in harmony with some aspects of the critique of ontotheology that is formative for later continental thought. But another thing that is important about Kierkegaard's concept of faith is that it is the gateway to Christian love. In faith, we encounter "the god in time," Jesus

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<sup>21</sup> Thesis 54 in Luther, *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* in *Selected Writings of Martin Luther 1517-1520*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 39.

<sup>22</sup> Consider, too, Karl Barth's discussion of the life of "thankful obedience" in the Reformed tradition's *Heidelberg Catechism*. He writes "It speaks only of being sorry for our sins. No catalogue of virtues is given. It is enough that this life is the work of grace and that good works proceed from it alone. Only that is required, but that *is* required. The question whether I *can* do even this little thing is quite pointless. Because *that* is required of me, nothing is asked of me except that I *be one who is redeemed!*" (Barth, *Learning Jesus Christ through the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 139).

<sup>23</sup> See the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church*, 39 available at:

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_31101999\\_cath-luth-joint-declaration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html).

<sup>24</sup> See Luther, *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*, 38.

<sup>25</sup> SKS 9, 12 and 378 / WL, 4 and 385.

<sup>26</sup> SKS 9, 177 / WL, 177.

<sup>27</sup> I think, in particular, of *The Proximity of the Other*, chapter 6 in *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 97-109.

Christ, and we are given access, through the forgiveness of sins,<sup>28</sup> to the “quiet lake” of divine love from which a human being’s love originates.<sup>29</sup> Kierkegaard puts a good deal of emphasis on this metaphor, and it works pretty well for him. It echoes well with the biblical text (St. Paul tells of the love of God being poured into our hearts through the work of the Spirit in Romans 5:5); it preserves the unconditionality of God’s love (what with the love being God’s and all); and it jibes well with the immediacy of love in his thought. There is something it doesn’t do very well, however. It doesn’t give us a very clear sense of human agency.

This point harkens back to St. Thomas Aquinas’s critique of Peter Lombard’s view of love. Lombard argued that the love with which we love our neighbor is itself the Holy Spirit,<sup>30</sup> and Aquinas wanted to argue that we possessed, instead, a created disposition of charity that is nevertheless placed within us and caused by the Holy Spirit.<sup>31</sup> There is no need here to rehearse Aquinas’s particular concerns in detail. Aquinas thought Lombard’s view problematic for a number of reasons, but the two main ones are that he thought it could not make sense out of the voluntariness of human action, and that it would not make sense of the concept of charity *as a virtue*. For the sake of coming back to home base, it’s worth pointing out that Kierkegaard seems a good fit for Lombard’s camp, since he claims, quite explicitly, that “The love-relationship requires threeness: the lover, the beloved, the love – but the love is God.”<sup>32</sup> So Kierkegaard’s account of love, which is central to his thought, might well be thought to be in tension with some traditional aspects of the concepts of virtue and dispositions.

But in recent years, a number of Kierkegaard scholars have been focused on trying to free Kierkegaard from the perception that his thought is inimical to the classical virtue tradition. I have argued elsewhere that I do not think this is a tension that can ever be totally dissolved in Kierkegaard’s work,<sup>33</sup> but I do think that these scholars do well to bring our attention to ways in which Kierkegaard’s concepts do not always cohere with what seem to be his mainly Lutheran views, either. For instance, Mark A. Tietjen rebuts several objections to viewing Kierkegaard within the virtue tradition,<sup>34</sup> and Robert C. Roberts argues effectively that Kierkegaard seems to have “virtuist” leanings when it comes to the idea of hope.<sup>35</sup> Still, what I think these contributions usually show is that Kierkegaard is tacitly or implicitly using a “virtuist” framework on certain topics but this is always in tension with what he seems explicitly to *say* about virtue and theological and moral frameworks in which the concept of virtue is at home. This

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<sup>28</sup> See especially SKS 7, 530-532 / CUP, 583-85.

<sup>29</sup> SKS 9, 16-18 / WL, 9-10.

<sup>30</sup> See Lombard, *The Sentences: Book 1: The Mystery of the Trinity*, distinction 17, trans. Giulio Silano (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2007).

<sup>31</sup> See Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on the Virtues*, Question 2, article 1, ed. E. M. Atkins and Thomas Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> SKS 9, 124 / WL, p. 121.

<sup>33</sup> See Jack Mulder, Jr., “Grace and Rigor in Kierkegaard’s Reception of the Church Fathers,” in *A Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Jon Stewart (Oxford: Blackwell, forthcoming).

<sup>34</sup> See Mark A. Tietjen, “Kierkegaard and the Classical Virtue Tradition,” *Faith and Philosophy*, 27 (2010): 153-73.

<sup>35</sup> See Roberts, “The Virtue of Hope in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*,” in Robert L. Perkins, ed., *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, vol. 5 (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003), 181-203.

observation does nothing to temper my admiration of Tietjen and Roberts, and only very little does it temper my admiration of Kierkegaard, but it does mean to me that Kierkegaard cannot always have everything that he wants. Thus, this is the space where I want to mount a Kierkegaardian (self-)critique.

What is interesting about Kierkegaard's concept of the self is that it is both descriptive and normative. The self, Anti-Climacus writes, "is a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another."<sup>36</sup> That is, as George Pattison puts it, the self is "not an individual substance of a rational essence but a being in dynamic and temporally charged ecstatic and open dependence on God."<sup>37</sup> While it is true that the self is related to God in some manner whether it wants to be or not, the self is only fully what it is intended to be, and in some sense really is, when that relationship is harmonious, or "transparent."<sup>38</sup> Yet, the love in which we find our blessed life issues forth immediately from this transparent relationship with God, so the idea of acquiring a "habit" seems to Kierkegaard to rest on one's previous achievements in love and move the immediacy of love from the command of God (where he thinks it belongs) to the disposition of the person. Rather, for Kierkegaard, we should always begin anew in the life of Christian love.

But need Kierkegaard be so suspicious of habit? It must surely be true that Christians should respond in obedience to God's commands to love the neighbor. It must surely be true that we cannot grow idle and rest on the laurels of our past deeds in love. But what real lover would do so? Indeed, it has become something of a truism that a mark of love is that it *grows*. What lover would not want to be *more* ready and disposed to love precisely in obedience to the command, or perhaps better, the wish, of the beloved? This does require constant recommitment, and a willingness to be transformed by that commitment. In that sense, we are always beginning, but each day the race begins at a new point. It is always possible to disqualify oneself and need to be reinvited to join this race, but it is not impossible to envision *progress* in it. Again, it may be that aspects of Kierkegaard's thought are compatible with this view, but I believe that it is in real tension with other significant aspects of his overall thought. Thus, the Kierkegaardian self-critique.

I believe a similar critique needs to be made when it comes to Kierkegaard's view of natural theology. Again, recent Kierkegaard scholarship has argued, to a large extent, effectively, I think, that Kierkegaard's religious epistemology has a good deal in common with externalist models of knowledge in the analytic tradition.<sup>39</sup> To see this, note that despite his disavowals of standard natural theological arguments, Kierkegaard writes "just as no one has ever proved it [i.e., God's existence],<sup>40</sup> so has there never been an atheist, even though there certainly have

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<sup>36</sup> SKS 11, 130 / SUD, 13-14.

<sup>37</sup> See Pattison, "Philosophy and Dogma: The Testimony of an Upbuilding Discourse," in *Ethics, Love, and Faith in Kierkegaard*, ed. Edward F. Mooney (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 155-162, 161.

<sup>38</sup> SKS 11, 130 / SUD, 14.

<sup>39</sup> See C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006) and chapter 1 of Jack Mulder, Jr., *Kierkegaard and the Catholic Tradition: Conflict and Dialogue* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

<sup>40</sup> This bracketed phrase is mine. The next is the Hong's' in their translation.

been many who have been unwilling to let what they knew (that the God [*Guden*] exists) get control of their minds.”<sup>41</sup> What this passage seems to say is that there is an awareness of God’s existence in everyone, though this can be diminished or weakened by factors having to do with the will. While sin seems to me to be part of the equation, I might add that sin has cultural and systemic repercussions, so that culpability may not be as simple as Kierkegaard’s claim seems at first to suggest.

The Kierkegaardian self-critique can be redeployed at this point. Kierkegaard’s own statements (and there are others like the one I quoted)<sup>42</sup> suggest that there is a framework for what Alvin Plantinga might call a “basic belief” in everyone, though this can be marred by sin.<sup>43</sup> The interesting thing about basic beliefs, however, is that they presuppose a certain threshold beyond which very specific beliefs or beliefs not integrally related to what Plantinga might call the design plan are not basic but can be arrived at by inference from beliefs that may perhaps be basic. Thus, I cannot *infer* the reliability of sense-perception but I can arrive at other beliefs that are not basic by taking the data of sense-perception to be basic. Similarly, if one has any kind of non-inferential basic beliefs in one’s catalogue of beliefs, one will no doubt have some kind of discriminating line to draw between those that are basic and those that aren’t. Some beliefs, such as a version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (and of course there are many), which is famously important for the Cosmological Argument for God’s existence,<sup>44</sup> certainly seem to be among the beliefs Aristotle took to be non-inferentially justified. And it is difficult to know why someone who thought God’s very existence might be non-inferentially basic might not hold that some version of a principle so fundamental that our world makes little sense without it could not also be non-inferentially justified. So, Kierkegaard, where is the line and why?

#### CONCLUSION

At this point, a common complaint from Kierkegaardian circles might echo a journal entry of his that notes “it is one thing to prove God’s existence while standing on one’s leg and something quite different to thank him on one’s knees.”<sup>45</sup> Quite true. One way of putting this complaint might be to ask what role for faith such a proof could possibly have other than distracting someone from the all-important existential dimension of Christian faith? But I am not convinced there is no role. In a famous episode from the movie *A Beautiful Mind*, John Nash uses reason to prove to himself that his illusory college roommate is in fact illusory.<sup>46</sup> He proves to himself that he’s hallucinating. Might it be possible to imagine some forms of natural theology as a bit of medicine to prove to ourselves that without God our systems are not ultimately sane? In our current

<sup>41</sup> JP, 3:3606 / PF, 191-92.

<sup>42</sup> See chapter 1 of Mulder, *Kierkegaard and the Catholic Tradition*.

<sup>43</sup> See Plantinga’s Warrant trilogy, but especially *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) for the fundamentals of the theory.

<sup>44</sup> See William L. Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998).

<sup>45</sup> SKS 19, 219-220 / Not7:57 / KJN, 3, p. 215.

<sup>46</sup> *A Beautiful Mind*, dir. Ron Howard, perf. Russell Crowe, Ed Harris, Jennifer Connelly, et al.: Imagine Entertainment, 2001.

philosophical climate of brains in vats, zombies, and all the rest, I would count such an awareness as a providential help, one that might help me embrace a revelatory event more readily. To me, this is a “religious interest” of mine, to echo Schrag’s language, one that I am happy to believe God chose, in freedom, to honor. I would certainly not deny God this right.

Some might allege that this position is simply ontotheology and comes with all of its problems. But I believe that some ways of construing problems in ontotheology are actually themselves ontotheological problems. If that is the case, then sometimes opposition to ontotheology can become a certain cottage industry with its own clearly marked terrain for where God can and cannot, appear. Thus, Heidegger’s question of how God enters into philosophy can prove to commit the fallacy of complex question. D.C. Schindler helpfully writes on this point that “Because it is *philosophy* that clears the space for the possibility of faith, philosophy by that very fact establishes the parameters within which faith must occur, if it is to occur at all. Notice the essential connection: a modesty that withdraws *a priori* is a presumption that sets the conditions of possibility”<sup>47</sup> In other words, the critique of ontotheology, at its worst, can be a form of false modesty. This is not to say that there cannot be *real* (and laudable) modesty in critiques of ontotheology. But just as concern over ontotheology resists Hegelian presumption in eclipsing faith through reason, so, too should faithful philosophers of religion resist the presumption of *a priori* restricting reason’s role in the creature’s feeble movement toward repentance and faith. Thus I am concerned that really leaving the agenda open to God’s own appearing in the manner God might choose requires us to be open to the idea that such an appearance might coincide with some of what has been given to reason as a kind of preliminary revelation. If that’s ontotheology (or perhaps better, with Schindler, “theo-ontology”<sup>48</sup>), then so much the worse for the critique of ontotheology.

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<sup>47</sup> See D.C. Schindler, *The Catholicity of Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 251.

<sup>48</sup> See Schindler, *The Catholicity of Reason*, 252.