God and self:
Ontology and intersubjectivity

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In the Letter of Introduction explaining the purpose of the Meditations to the theology faculty at Paris, Descartes explicitly identifies the two problems that he finds central to philosophical inquiry. "I have always thought that the two questions, of God and of the soul, were the principal questions among those that should be demonstrated by rational philosophy." Without a doubt, it is these two fundamental issues — the certainty of the self’s existence, with the how of its existence, as soul, mind, cogito; and the certainty of the existence of God, provided for in what traditionally has been designated the ‘ontological argument’ — that set the course of the Meditations. Indeed, debate on these matters has a long and venerable, if equally stormy, history in philosophy as a whole.

Given the largely concomitant employment of these ‘insights’ (a well-founded claim can be made that they are not arguments, at least not in a strictly logical sense) in the philosophical tradition generally referred to as ‘transcendentalism,’ it is natural and important to inquire into the relation, if there is any, that holds between the two. In particular, the relation between the intuition of the self as certainly existing, the ego cogito ergo sum, and the intuition of the reality of God, that is, the recognition of absolute reality, takes a central role in the work of two transcendentalist philosophers, René Descartes and William Earle. The question at hand, therefore, is to investigate the relation between the two insights and their parallel importance in the project of rational ‘grounding.’

The specific issue that provides a test for the interrelatedness
of intuitions of God and self is intersubjectivity. In Descartes, the *cogito* leads to the ontological argument as a direct methodological progression, for it is the certain knowledge of God that alone provides a verificational grounding for experiencing the world and other selves. While the problem of intersubjectivity is less apparent in the work of William Earle, primarily because it is raised to a higher sphere, it assumes a position of utmost importance. In Earle’s contention that the *cogito* and ontological argument are radically fused, that the self or ego is God in a living situation, lies implicit the problem of ‘ontological intersubjectivity’ – which concerns not the practical fact of human community but the nature and unity of absolute reality.

**Descartes: Ontological certainty as the escape from solipsism**

The method employed by Descartes in the course of the *Meditations* is, of course, familiar to every serious student of philosophy. Faced with an ever-burgeoning mass of opinion and error in the sciences (and, for that matter, in all human disciplines), Descartes introduces the investigative tool of methodical doubt, by which any matter that can be doubted in the least is provisionally set aside as if it were false: “reason already convinces me that I should abstain from the belief in things which are not entirely certain and indubitable no less carefully than from the belief in those which appear to me to be manifestly false.” The point of this procedure is to attempt to find some ‘Archimedean point,’ some solid foundation upon which the sciences and knowledge as a whole can be grounded. The edifice of purported knowledge, despite its ostensible justification by “customary and long-standing beliefs,” is gradually chipped away by the method of doubt; one by one entire fields of so-called certainty fall: the reliability of the senses, the actual existence of the external world, even the existence of the meditator’s own body. Using the thought-experiment device of the ‘Evil Genius,’ and emphasizing the constant human tendency to err, Descartes even argues that the sciences of general or simple ideas – the *a priori* disciplines such as mathematics and geometry – are not immune from failure, and therefore cannot be exempted from the force of doubt. Is there then no