Paradoxes in Kierkegaard’s Understanding of Christian Love

QUOTATIONS

1. The Christian doctrine is not to make exceptions, neither of preference or aversion (WL, 19).¹

2. You shall love (WL, 24).

3. To love is a duty (WL, 24).

4. In erotic love, the I is defined as sensate-psychical-spiritual; the beloved is a sensate-psychical-spiritual specification. In friendship, the I is defined as psychical-spiritual; the friend is a psychical-spiritual specification. It is only in the love for the neighbor that the self, who loves, is defined as spirit, purely spiritual (WL, 56-57).

5. His love [Christ’s] made no distinction, not the tenderest distinction…because his divine human love made no distinction (WL, 100).

6. Christianity teaches that love is a relationship between a person-God-a person, that is, that God is the middle term…to help another person to love God is to love another person (WL, 107).

7. Everything that is to be kept alive must remain in its element. Love’s element is infinitude (WL, 180).

8. Comparison is the most disastrous association that love can enter into (WL, 186).

In this paper I examine how many of Kierkegaard’s major claims made about love, when taken together, lead to incongruencies and in some cases, complete paradoxes. I rely primarily on eight statements that are presented above and are often repeated throughout Works of Love. I argue that there are three main paradoxes which unfold as Kierkegaard builds his argument about the true meaning of Christian love.

¹ Soren Kierkegaard, Works of Love, edited and translated by Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). All references from Works of Love are taken from the Howard and Edna Hong edition. Throughout the remainder of this essay, I will abbreviate Works of Love as WL with the corresponding page number.
The first quagmire I focus on involves the claims in statements one, two, three and six above. I provide a thought experiment that reveals a paradox concerning preferential love, love as a duty and the definition that love is to help bring another person to know God. The second main argument I propose utilizes statements one and five. Here I present evidence that Jesus did have preferential love and did make distinctions. My supporting evidence is drawn from gospel quotations and the greater Christian tradition. The final paradox I uncover relies on propositions four, seven and eight. Kierkegaard says that only neighborly love is purely spiritual, yet erotic love and friendship love appear to be fuller, more nuanced and richer given Kierkegaard’s description. One imagines that erotic love is only sensual, not sensate-psychical-spiritual. However, in authentic and sincere relationships between a husband and wife for example, erotic love may involve all three. Therefore, I argue that if one uses the sensate and psychical as “metaphors,” “manifestations,” or “vehicles” for expressing the spiritual, then the erotic can be more intense and significant than the purely neighborly love of a stranger.

This paper is divided into two sections. In section one, I provide my arguments and critical analysis of the selected quotations above. In the second section, I summarize the arguments from section one and propose some possible solutions to the paradoxes. Throughout sections one and two, I will incorporate secondary source material when relevant. However, as no one has made the same arguments as I am making, there is no need to examine any direct previous scholarship.

I. PARADOXES

Paradox 1 - I present the following thought experiment to elucidate my first main point. Imagine that you are a part of a research experiment on love and you are told that it is your task to explain as much as you can about God in ten minutes to four other participants. These four participants are behind a curtain so you have no idea who they are. All that you are told is that you are supposed to use your everyday speech, mannerisms and examples from your own life, to help bring these four people to know and love God. In this experiment, you are fulfilling Kierkegaard’s first point listed above, which is that Christian love makes no distinctions and aversions. In this case you are incapable of making any distinctions between the four and you obviously have no
aversion to any since you do not know who they are. Kierkegaard’s second and third points explain that to love is a duty and you are lovingly attempting to bring these three people to know God, which is Kierkegaard’s last main point: that to help another person to love God is to truly love another person.

To return to our thought experiment, insert yourself into the position of the participant who must persuade the four unknown individuals. In my case, I would attempt to use logical arguments and probably thought experiments to help prove the reality of God and the fact that we have an innate moral nature. To be more specific, I would use Mencius’s arguments to prove the innateness of morality and I would argue for the contemporary relevance of a Process conception of deity and why it is important to know this and come to love this representation of God. Of course I would use my own particular slang and style of speech, as well as examples from my own life, to help illustrate my main points in the ten minutes.

Now imagine that at the end of the ten minutes all four of the other participants were asked to write down what they had heard and learned and what they thought I was driving at. After the results were tallied the participants came out from behind the screen and the first person was revealed to be an adolescent girl who had virtually no idea of what I was talking about and was furthermore, bored out of her mind by the speech. The second person was a Buddhist man who enjoyed the speech, but misconstrued the main points because he was interpreting them through his own Buddhist hermeneutic. The third person was a Hispanic woman who barely knew any English and therefore, she understood little of what I had said. However, the final individual was revealed to be my best friend, who gave an impressive retelling of my overall arguments and was the most convinced by the speech.

The purpose of the above thought experiment is to highlight the reality that you are more likely to be able to help your close friends come to know God because you can use shared experiences, customized language and knowledge of their interests to provide a level of communication that will be far more effective and efficient. If it is my duty to help others to come to love God and I’m not supposed to show preferences or distinctions in love, then the first paradox is that the best way to fulfill my duty is to choose to help
my friends.² It is not a choice based on preference, only a choice made in order to fulfill my duty. It is not that I am preferring my friend, instead, the choice comes about from the awareness that I am more likely to bring them to know God. Of course this choice and awareness involves a sort of discrimination among options, which utilizes distinctions and contrasts.

I do not dispute Kierkegaard’s points in and of themselves, only that when they are taken together we find a number of inconsistencies. I accept that a true love relationship must have God as the middle term and that we should help others to come to love God, but the problems arise from inserting an idealized, unhistorical and non-biblical version of the founder of Christianity as the paradigmatic case of true love and the exemplar of a perfect life that we should seek to emulate. This point leads us to our next paradox which concerns the life of Jesus.

**Paradox 2-** The second paradox revolves around the fact that it can easily be shown that the historical Jesus did have preferential love and made distinctions. Kierkegaard says, “Christ is essentially the prototype; therefore we should be like him and not merely reap benefits from him” (WL, 471). “His [Christ’s] love made no distinction, not the tenderest distinction between his mother and other people…and in turn his love did not make the distinction of his disciples” (WL, 100). These quotes and many others point to the fact that Kierkegaard views Christ as the measure or prototype of Christian love. If we are to follow Christ’s example, then one must ask, which version of Christ?

Even by adhering strictly to passages from scripture, we see many instances where Jesus exercises preference and makes distinctions. And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the Kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven” (Mk. 4:11). “Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine” (Matt. 7:6). To these canonical accounts, we could also add a few examples of distinctions from various Gnostic tracts. “These are the secret words, which the Living Jesus spoke and Didymos

² Perhaps this is why we find the topic of love being discussed at a symposium in Plato. It must begin with those closest to you so that a proper level of precise and mutual understanding can be attained. Of course the conceptions of the ideal form of love are quite different in Kierkegaard and Plato, but perhaps Plato was at least on to something by accepting the reality that in order to fully understand all the nuances of love, we must be amongst those closest to us.
Judas Thomas wrote” (*Gospel of Thomas* Introduction). “Wherever you are, you are to go to James the righteous, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being” (*Gospel of Thomas*, 12). There are many more examples throughout different Gnostic texts.  

It seems indisputable that Jesus made distinctions, value judgments and condemnations. Even the very fact of having twelve apostles sets up an inner circle mentality. Scripture even goes as far as to tell us that within these twelve, Jesus made distinctions. “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church… I will give you the keys to the kingdom of Heaven…” (Mt 16.18-20). “One of his disciples, the one whom Jesus loved was reclining next to him” (Jn 13.21-23). Once again, we also find reference to a favored disciple in the Gnostic Gospels, however, here she is named as Mary Magdalene. “And the companion of the […] Mary Magdalene […] loved her more than all the other disciples, and used to kiss her often on the mouth… They said to him, “Why do you love her more than all of us?’.” I feel that these are more than enough quotations to prove the point: Jesus had preferences and made distinctions. *The second paradox is that Christ is the prototype, but Kierkegaard wants us to emulate an ahistorical, idealized version of Christ.*

**Paradox 3**- The final paradox that I will address deals with three forms of love: eros, philia and agape. Kierkegaard claims that it is only in the neighborly love of agape that one’s love is purely spiritual. *What seems paradoxical is that Kierkegaard defines erotic love as sensate-psychical-spiritual, friendship as psychical and spiritual and neighborly love as purely spiritual. The conundrum is that erotic love appears to be a richer or fuller form of love in that it encompasses more arenas of human life or our overall nature. It would seem that if a love is first sensate and psychical that it could then lead to a more intense spiritual experience or connection.*

My argument here is that if one’s relationship is composed of all three elements, then each form of love will mutually enrich the other form and it is this interplay that is the deepest and most profound expression of love. Christian love is undoubtedly

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1 In fact nearly all of the Gnostic texts are claims of special revelation from the savior or some other spiritual being. For example, the *Apocryphon of John*, *Apocryphon of James* and the *Gospel of Mary* all claim to contain the secret message and teaching of Jesus. Of these three texts, only the *Apocryphon of John* even comes close to the first century in its composition. However, it is worth taking into account the words of the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Apocryphon of John* as they represent two separate streams of early Christian Gnosticism that may reflect some of the true teachings of Jesus.

important, but if “love’s element is infinitude,” then how can we narrow it down to one
type of “purely” spiritual representation or expression. In fact there is previous
scholarship that addresses this point. Ronald Green and Theresa Ellis point out that it is
not that erotic love is opposed to spiritual love necessarily, it is only that erotic and
friendship love are transformed when they are activated in the religious sphere of love.
“Thus erotic love in the religious stage evidences another paradox: unconditional
acceptance of the beloved conjoined with a moral will toward the beloved’s betterment.”

The key to true love is self-renouncing and it is not true that only neighborly love
can represent this. “The intent of the dialectic points beyond mere differentiation and
opposition to an eventual or ultimate union of natural and spiritual, the temporal and the
eternal, the human and the Christian through the transforming power of self-renouncing
love.” The key is self renouncing love. I agree with the points of Sylvia Walsh, Ronald
Green and Theresa Ellis; however, it is difficult to accept that Kierkegaard didn’t place
neighborly or purely spiritual love at a higher and in many ways, oppositional form of
love to eros and philia. There are simply too many passages that seem to condemn eros
and philia and only one strong passage which could be interpreted as suggesting the
opposite.

I grant the fact that purely erotic lust or utilitarian friendships are poor displays of
love and are really about self-love and selfish motivation, but I do not accept that erotic
love and friendship are somehow incapable of participating or allowing for the
dissolution of self-love. During erotic intercourse, it is not always about self gratification
it can be about an experience of union, merger and oneness and this is not to establish a
new I or an ours versus theirs mentality. Erotic love is capable of being a vehicle for
transporting one beyond self-love and into just love, love’s “isness” or “suchness.” This

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5 Ronald Green and Theresa Ellis, “Erotic Love in the Religious Existence-Sphere,” in *the International
Kierkegaard Commentary: Works of Love*, edited by Robert Perkins (Macon: Mercer University Press,
1999), 360.
6 Sylvia Walsh, “Kierkegaard’s Philosophy of Love,” in *the Nature and Pursuit of Love: The Philosophy of
7 “Christianity, however, knows only one kind of love, the spirits love, but this can lie at the base of and be
present in every other expression of love” (WL, 146). This quote may seem to partially resolve the paradox
I am addressing, but really it does not because the quote says nothing about the fact that if the spirits love is
present in all other forms of love, then the strongest form of love should be sensate-psyehical-spiritual. The
passage does not however, make any mention of this point. It merely states that true love or the seed of true
love, in the form of self-renouncing, can be present in all forms of love. In fact, I feel that Kierkegaard is
only saying that God is present as the middle term in all relationships, but we just do not recognize his
presence during erotic and friendship love and due to this lack of awareness, our love is flawed.

fact is the central focus of many religious traditions i.e. (Tantric Buddhism, Taoist sexual yoga and many branches of Western occultism).

Love’s element is infinitude and comparison can destroy love and create a rift. Unfortunately, I feel that this is precisely what Kierkegaard does by splitting love into three separate camps and making value judgments about each one, referring to the sensate and the psychical as primarily pagan or the property of poets. Kierkegaard believes that comparison is antithetical to love and that it is a sign of self-love, but don’t we often compare and discriminate in order to make the right or ethical choice? Throughout *Works of Love*, we come across comparisons: sensate/psychical/spiritual, Jesus/us, pagans/Christians. This said, I must stress that I agree with nearly all of Kierkegaard’s specific examples, I just don’t agree that the issue or concept being treated is therefore, automatically antithetical to Christian or authentic love and has no place when discussing true love. Yes, frequently erotic and friendship love is selfish, comparison can be selfish, virtues can be self-motivated, but not always. It is possible that erotic and friendship love can express self-denial, comparison can be employed to help others and virtues are cultivated because it is the right thing to do.

II. RESOLUTIONS OF THE PARADOXES

The way to resolve the first paradox is to accept the fact that we are more capable of bringing our friends to God and then, *via extension* among intimate friends, the whole world will receive the message and knowledge of God’s reality and presence. Of course I do not mean to suggest that we should not help strangers as well, *only that we should begin with those closest to us and extend from there*. This process of extension central to religions, such as, Confucianism, is also the biblical Christian approach to achieving excellence and experiencing the holy.

In the thought experiment I provided in section one, there were four people with different backgrounds who were all trying to understand a message about God that I was sending to them through the best possible means I knew of: my own experience. I proposed that it was likely that I would benefit my friend the most, because we can relate on multiple levels: shared experience, linguistic similarities, similar cultural embeddedness etc. However, if we apply the philosophy of extension, we might see that my best friend is also very familiar with Buddhism and therefore, would likely be more
proficient than myself in relating to the Buddhist man in the research group. Now imagine the Buddhist man was married to a woman who also knew Spanish and therefore, she could explain my original message to the Spanish speaking participant with greater clarity and persuasiveness. These examples show the power and logic of extension; a logic that the first Christian apostles knew well and applied during their missionary work.

Kierkegaard could rightly provide a counter claim to the above argument by saying that “like is known by like” through works of love. The words used are of secondary or minimal importance in moving someone emotionally or spiritually. Instead it matters “how the work is done.” This is of course a valid point and I accept that this is true. I can still communicate something of God’s love and reality to a stranger merely through my actions, or the way in which I perform them, but is this enough? Certain actions and the intended meaning, purpose and motive for the action are still going to be interpreted by the other in a specific culturally conditioned manner. My intention to act lovingly towards a stranger may be perceived as a threat. However, in theory, my love should strike a resonant chord within the other through my actions, words, presence or whatever. But, if like already recognizes like, if love feels love’s presence in another as real and present, or if I see God in the other or God uniting us as a middle term, then both parties are already living well and we don’t need to help each other to come to know God because we are already there. If like knows like, then like is already present. If the “other’s” awareness of love and God is absent, then it is my duty to make them aware, but then my best hope for helping the other, is to extend from myself to friends and family to acquaintances etc.

Either the other is already aware of God or not, if they are, then once again, how is it my duty to help them to know God if they already do? If God and love are not currently present in the other, then I must help them to become aware of this reality and I can only do this through, first self cultivation and then extension. Only self cultivation can bring the tree to fruition and only the fruits carry the true greatness and the reproductive or reproducible properties of the plant. The fruits are recognizable and they are shared. Kierkegaard does not seem to focus on how one is to self cultivate or how one is to extend, but he does provide a clue. “Christ is the prototype.”
Christ brings us to the second paradox, which is intertwined with the first. If Christ is the prototype of the ideal Christian life, then one must be willing to look at all the Gospels and see what his overriding message, approach and lifestyle was. I feel that a simple examination of the Gospels shows that Christ did have preferences and did make distinctions. It appears that Jesus’ message was one of change motivated by the problems of his day, such as, the Roman occupation and the corrupt priesthood. He clearly prefers a life that is not based on extortion, murder, deceit and power mongering. All of this is rather self evident, but what may be less obvious is Jesus’ method for achieving his goals of change.

In the quotations I outlined in section one, it seems that Jesus did have favorites and gave them special knowledge or at least was more willing to confide in them certain pieces of information. It also appears that his strategy was one of extension and so he wisely gathered twelve disciples whom he could provide the intricacies of his plan. These twelve apostles shared a similar cultural background, language, religion etc. and so he knew he could convey his message easier to each one of them. Next, he performed miracles to build interest and a certain mystique. Then he performed a final heroic act of steadfastness in the face of evil and he became the highest example of virtue and proved his convictions, which gave validity to the ideas he had so passionately preached.

Undoubtedly Kierkegaard’s main point about Christ as prototype is that he represents the moral and religious role model that we should follow. Paul Martens takes care to draw this distinction that Jesus’ whole life is not to be simply mimicked. “The term ‘presents’ means that the necessity to completely mimic Christ is impossible, but his example does serve as the goal to which we strive.” The point being made here is that Jesus’ whole life is not to be studied exhaustively and scrutinized, so that we then can know precisely what true Christian love is. Instead, we are to recognize that Jesus was a real historical figure and that his life presents us with a general outline for living well and expressing true love. It is my opinion that this supposed distinction does little good because Kierkegaard nowhere delineates precisely what elements of Jesus’ life are historical and what parts are likely fictional embellishments and therefore, not suitable for emulation.

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I find it very dangerous to put in place a moral role model that has been described as perfect in every way and has been deified. If one uses a role model from mythology, or fantasy or the movies etc. it creates an unrealistic version of the good life that is unattainable in the real world. This unattainability can lead one to strive for miraculous powers, which can lead to megalomania and a general delusion. The gap between you and the “perfect” role model can appear nearly infinite, which may cause you to be turned away from ever beginning the path of self cultivation or if you do start you may create unrealistic expectations of what is to come down the road, like superhero powers etc. A real role model that has not been distorted by myth making is required for true success and continued motivation.

To conclude my discussion of the second paradox, I believe that Jesus made distinctions and had preferences. Jesus had preferences between lifestyles, among his disciples and even among his own family. Furthermore, I feel that there is nothing wrong with this and that it is only natural. Regarding Christ as a prototype, I feel that Kierkegaard needs to be clearer as to what aspects of Jesus we are to emulate and what stories of Christ we are to refer to when seeking guidance and inspiration. Personally I would dismiss all the stories referring to miracles, because we really don’t know what Jesus did and did not do and how he may have performed such feats. If we take all the stories about Jesus as fact combined with his later deification, we have an unrealistic role model that could be detrimental to self cultivation if he is used as exemplifying a realistic state that we can all achieve. That said, as a general moral role model, I believe that Jesus stands as a fine prototype for a life well lived and a man who knew how to love. An interesting question would be, did Jesus share Kierkegaard’s belief that only agapic love is purely spiritual?

In order to resolve the third and final paradox, two main points need to be discussed concerning the three classical forms of love. My first point is that eros and philia can be vehicles for extinguishing self-love and the distinction mine/yours. The second main point is that a specific form of erotic relationship can provide the ultimate expression of love. Kierkegaard’s problems with eros and philia are that they “are
preferential love and the passion of preferential love” and that they are incapable of extinguishing the mine/yours dichotomy.

Ronald Green and Theresa Ellis endeavor to prove that,

Christian love can play a decisive role in sustaining committed erotic love in the face of the inevitable assaults that menace it. It does so in three ways: (1) by drawing attention to what is essentially human in the beloved and thus freeing each lover from preoccupation with the beloved’s ever changing particularity; (2) by chastening the augmented egoism that can make a love relationship destructive both within and without and that fuels jealousy and resentment; and (3) by placing each party in independent relationship to God so as to provide room for personal development, freedom and courageous mutual support.⁹

I agree with the above statements which bring up key ways in which Christian love can purify the other forms of love while not demanding that they be left behind. However, the main goal of Green and Ellis is to show that erotic love has a place in the religious existence, whereas I am saying that the religious sphere and the Christian love ideal of self-renouncing are most richly expressed in the erotic sphere. The issue at hand is whether or not eros and philia necessarily involve preferences and if they are capable of extinguishing the mine/yours dichotomy. Green and Ellis believe that eros and philia are capable of participating in true self-renouncing love as evidenced by the above quotation. I also believe that eros and philia can achieve an extinguishing of the mine/yours dichotomy, but first I will address Kierkegaard’s claim that eros and philia are always born of preferential love.

It is true that eros and philia often involve preferences, but that is not always to say it represents a conscious preference. The concept of resonance seems to often operate in eros and philia. We don’t consciously choose this person or that person for selfish reasons, instead we seem to be magnetically drawn to them as if we were compelled by a natural law or force. When we connect with these people, it is possible as Kierkegaard points out that even if the mine/yours dichotomy appears to vanish with a merger of two

I’s into one new I, all we have really accomplished is to setup a new dichotomy of ours versus theirs. But is this necessarily so? Isn’t it possible for you to lose your self-concern and self-interest in erotic love and friendship without setting up a new dichotomy?

A merger of two I’s shows to a person that they are capable of being internally related to another person and this realization can open the doors to becoming aware of the reality of interrelatedness of all things. In other words, eros and philia can be vehicles to transport you to the final realization that all things are interrelated. Therefore, eros and philia have a lot to do with true love because they are stages on love’s way so to speak, to the ultimate generalization of love: love of all things as yourself. It is a process of extension once again, extending from self-love, to realizing interrelatedness and love with another individual in eros, to many others in philia, to all others in agape.

I return now to Kierkegaard’s paradoxical phrase about eros and philia; that eros is sensate-psychical-spiritual, philia is psychical and spiritual and only agape is spiritual. If this framework is true, then eros is capable of providing the most intense experience of interrelatedness because it encompasses the most dimensions of life. We resolve the paradox by showing that a specific form of eros can provide the most personally moving experience of self-denial and interrelatedness. This specific form of eros has been called finding one’s soul mate or life partner. During erotic love with one’s soul mate, there is a physical connection, a psychical connection and due to the dissolving of the illusion of separateness via physical and psychical merger, the doors open to the possibility of a purely spiritual experience of oneness or emptiness.

This experience of soul mate love is the intense and multifaceted experience of self denial on three levels: denying your body as separate, denying your mind and soul as separate and then dwelling in pure spirit. In strictly agapic love, you can only understand self-denial from one dimension and therefore, the intensity is diminished, whereas in a specific form of erotic love, you can know self-denial from all three perspectives. It is not the “other I” that is loved, it is not the neighbor that is loved either. When both I’s drop out and dissolve, there is only one aspect left in Kierkegaard’s equations of love: God. It is possible via eros to experience dwelling in the spirit, or in God and if this has
happened, *then by definition you are automatically related to all others because God is intimately related to all things as the omnipresent middle term.*

“In erotic love and friendship, preferential love is the middle term; in love for the neighbor, God is the middle term” (WL, 57-58). In conclusion, I would have to respond to Kierkegaard, that this is not necessarily true. If God initially compelled the erotic love or if God initially compelled the friendship and in that erotic love or friendship a moment arrives when the two “I’s” dissolve, then God as the middle term is all that is left. The real issue isn’t that eros and philia are incapable of partaking in true love, instead, the concern is rather or not the erotic love or friendship was motivated consciously by self interest or rather if it was an unconscious drawing together. The latter possibility means that it was the work of true love because it was the working of God himself bringing two people together and if this is the foundation of the relationship then erotic love reveals itself as the pinnacle of true love, because of its incorporation of the most vehicles (sensate-psychical-spiritual) for reaching and experiencing the eternal.

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10 This statement seems to fly in the face of the passage on page 146, where Kierkegaard said that Christian love can be present in all forms of love.