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Kierkegaard's Error

In September 1840, the budding philosopher Søren Kierkegaard realized he had made a terrible mistake. It was one of the sort many men make. Some manage to correct it in time; some do not. It had to do with a proposal of marriage, and in this case at least, it led to an extraordinarily romantic tale.

The great lovers of history and literature are usually characters with dash, and their stories are highly dramatic, laced with glamour, intrigue, and sometimes violence. But Kierkegaard was a rather unromantic figure. The surviving pictures of him are sketches, chiefly caricatures (he did not have his portrait painted or his daguerreotype taken), but they show him as a small, stoop-shouldered man with side whiskers and eyeglasses, which no doubt detracted from the effect of the dapper attire he was fond of wearing. His romance took place in the parlors of the Copenhagen bourgeoisie. Despite this staid backdrop, Kierkegaard's romance has the aura of one of the great love stories of Western history.

His beloved was a young woman named Regine Olsen. Like Kierkegaard, she belonged to the upper middle class of the Danish capital. Kierkegaard had met her in May 1837, when she was fourteen and he twenty-four. He was immediately captivated—a condition he concealed with a masterful display of wit. She, too, must have been taken by him; describing the encounter sixty years

later, she remembered the strong impression he had made on her, although she could recall nothing of what he said.¹

It was not until three years after that first meeting that Kierkegaard began to frequent the Olsen household. In September 1840, he met Regine on the street on his way to her house. No one else was at home, and she invited him in. She began to play the piano, but Kierkegaard stopped her, saying, "Oh, what do I care about music. It is you I have wanted, and have wanted these two years." Two days later he came and asked for her hand. She accepted.

Immediately afterward, Kierkegaard went into paroxysms of remorse. When Regine saw him several days later at a party, she found him "completely changed—absent and cold," as one friend recollected. Thus began several months of ambiguity and equivocation, eloquently reflected in Kierkegaard's letters to her, a series that begins with ardor and ends with curt excuses for his absence. Finally their engagement breaks off. It is she who breaks with him, but as he confesses, it is he who has provoked it. Fashionable Copenhagen denounces the young cleric as a scoundrel. Regine soon finds a new suitor, whom she marries. Kierkegaard stays single for the rest of his life.

If this were the whole story, it wouldn't be worth telling: reneging on vows of devotion is common and indeed clichéd. But it's clear that Kierkegaard didn't break with Regine because he did not love her. In a note to his brother at the end of his life, Kierkegaard directs that all his estate is to go to Regine: "To me an engagement was and is just as binding as a marriage, and that therefore my estate is her due, exactly as if I had been married to her."² Even if we knew nothing else about Kierkegaard, we could tell from this that he was not a cad.

Another anecdote casts more light on this unusual relationship. One day Kierkegaard rented a carriage and took Regine out for a drive to the country—something that delighted her immeasurably. But he soon turned around and took her back, "so that she could

be accustomed to denying herself pleasures," according to Henrik Hertz, an acquaintance who told the story. "He should have been beaten on the a_____ for that," Hertz added.³

Something strange, then, was at work in Kierkegaard's feelings for Regine. In the first place, he may have fled simply because he was terrified by the prospect of his own happiness—a common reaction among melancholic types, as he was. At times his letters suggest that he is also afraid of making her miserable. Kierkegaard may give still another hint in his *Works of Love*, written in 1847: "One may make the mistake of calling love that which is really self-love: when one loudly protests that he cannot live without his beloved but will hear nothing about love's task and demand, which is that he deny himself and give up the self-love of erotic love."⁴

As grand as this sounds, it fails to explain why "love's task and demand" should automatically mean giving up "the self-love of erotic love." Regine was by far the more passionate of the two (Kierkegaard once tried to subdue her ardor by presenting her with a New Testament), so his yielding to this "self-love" might not have been totally selfish after all. But the episode with the carriage suggests that this impulse toward sacrifice runs very deep in Kierkegaard, as it does in the Christian tradition of which he is a part.

The same point was driven home to me years ago when I was a student. I was ringing in the New Year—it must have been 1978 or '79—with some friends in a seedy bar on New York's Upper East Side (seedy bars being more common there then than they are now). We found ourselves sitting next to an elderly and rather drunk Irish lady. At one point she burst out, "The Catholic Church kept me from marryin' the man I loved!"

We turned to the woman, and she launched into her story. Fifty years before in Ireland, she knew a man she was powerfully attracted to, but her religious upbringing had given her the idea that it was sinful to have these feelings. She decided that the right

thing to do was marry another man, whom she did *not* desire, and she evidently lived unhappily with him ever after.

I did the only thing I could, which was to listen with the bland sympathy with which one receives confidences from a stranger at a bar, but the episode left a deep impression on me. It's curious to think that Kierkegaard, one of the finest philosophical minds of recent centuries, and an old woman who did not seem very well educated should have fallen into the same trap, but apparently they did.

The old woman lived to regret her decision; to all appearances Kierkegaard made peace with his. Both their stories raise the question of why this automatic leap into self-sacrifice and this spurning of sexuality seem so automatic in Christianity. The religion of love *par excellence*, it is also the religion of the *sublimation* of love. In its two thousand-year history, Christianity in most of its forms has unstintingly preached the superiority of spiritual love to the sexual variety. And it has just as relentlessly preached that the latter is to be sacrificed to the former.

These are not just abstract considerations. As the old woman's story suggests, this problem intrudes into relationships everywhere. From the male point of view, it can lead to the madonna-whore complex, in which the man cannot permit himself to feel sexually attracted to the woman he loves emotionally or to feel love for a woman who has sex with him. One can only wonder how many infidelities and broken marriages are due to this strange split in the Western psyche.

Where does this tension come from? Christianity owes as much, or more, to Plato than it does to Christ, and this motif of sublimation goes back to the Greek philosopher. It appears in the *Symposium*, at whose climax Socrates tells of his initiation into the mysteries of love by an old priestess named Diotima.

Diotima's instructions for finding the true meaning of love at first don't sound very Christian: "The candidate for this initiation cannot, if his efforts are to be rewarded, begin too early to devote himself to the beauties of the body." But this is only an elementary

step. "Next," she continues, "he must grasp that the beauties of the body are as nothing to the beauties of the soul, so that wherever he meets with spiritual loveliness, even in the husk of an unlovely body, he will find it beautiful enough to fall in love with and to cherish." Then the devotee is to take his sights still higher and cultivate love of beauty in its more abstract forms: "The quest for the universal beauty must find him ever mounting the heavenly ladder . . . until at last he comes to know what beauty is. . . . And once you have seen it, you will never be seduced again by the charm of gold, or dress, or comely boys."⁵ Love is to culminate in contemplation of the Form of Beauty, the abstract quality whose presence in earthly things is what, according to Plato, makes them beautiful.

Diotima's course in love involves increasing sophistication; the seeker passes from love of the flesh to the more abstract but finer love of the intellect. This ascent has given rise to the term *platonic love*. This picture has no real ethical component, or if it does, it is far in the background. Diotima paints the progression as an education in connoisseurship.

And yet for Kierkegaard more than two thousand years later, spiritual love is *morally* superior to physical love, and he seems to think that one of these must be sacrificed if a person is to have the other. In this he echoes much of the Christian tradition, which over the centuries grew more and more disapproving of sex in any circumstances. At first it merely urges that sex be limited to marriage. Paul advises the Corinthians to remain celibate, "even as I myself," but he also says, "Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband" (1 Corinthians 7:2, 7). The *Didache* ["Teaching"] of the Twelve Apostles, one of the earliest Christian writings, dating probably from the early second century, simply warns, "Beware of the carnal appetites of the body."⁶ The second-century allegory *The Shepherd of Hermas* (revered by many early Christians as a sacred text) urges, "Always keep your mind on your own wife and you will never go wrong. For if this desire [for another man's wife]

enters your heart, you will go wrong, and if other things as evil as this enter, you will sin.”⁷

This guidance is perfectly sensible. But the stance grows more rigid over the centuries to the point where the flesh is always evil and sexuality always wrong—sometimes even *within* marriage. The church father Jerome (c. 340–420) even says, “‘He who too ardently loves his wife is an adulterer.’ It is disgraceful to love another man’s wife at all, or one’s own too much.”⁸ Jerome doesn’t go so far as to say that sex within marriage is sinful (he would have gone against Scripture if he had), but he comes as close as he can. Like most church fathers, he regards the wedded state as a poor second choice to celibacy. Kierkegaard, eminently learned in theology, must have been influenced at least to some degree by these ideas.

Then there is the element of sacrifice. Christ’s well-known command that “thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Mark 12:31) has frequently been altered by later Christianity in a subtle but crucial way. The *Epistle of Barnabas*, written probably in the first century A.D., urges, “Love your neighbour *more than* yourself.”⁹

At first glance, *Barnabas* may seem to offer an improvement on Christ’s original statement. After all, if it’s good to love your neighbor as yourself, isn’t it better to love him more than yourself? Not necessarily. Christ’s original message erases distinctions; it lowers the barriers between human beings. *Barnabas*, with whatever good intentions, brings in the element of quantity, and with it a kind of cost-benefit analysis. One is presumably to calculate how much one loves another versus oneself and make sure the equation comes out right. It ultimately reinforces the barrier between self and other, thus defeating what may have been the purpose of Christ’s directive.

These two threads—the antipathy to sexuality and the urge toward sacrifice—have been deeply interwoven into Christian life and thought and through them into much of Western civilization, even in today’s secular society. They raise questions that underlie

many perplexities of human relations. In order to experience true love, do we have to sacrifice sexuality? Still more fundamentally, does love always have to *cost* something?

Kierkegaard has no doubts on this score. In *Works of Love* he writes:

If a lover had done something for the beloved, something humanly speaking so extraordinary, lofty, and sacrificial that we men were obliged to say, "This is the utmost one human being can do for another"—this certainly would be beautiful and good. But suppose he added, "See now I have paid my debt." Would not this be speaking unkindly, coldly, and harshly? Would it not be, if I may say it this way, an indecency which ought never to be heard, never in the good fellowship of true love? If, however, the lover did this noble and sacrificial thing and then added, "But I have one request—let me remain in debt": would this not be speaking in love?

He goes on to make a strange argument: "*Everything which shall be kept alive must be kept in its element.* But love's element is infinitude, inexhaustibility, immeasurability." Thus "to be and remain in infinite debt is in itself an expression of love's infinitude."¹⁰ Kierkegaard no doubt intends to be both paradoxical and profound, but there's a problem with his argument. After all, what does debt involve if not the keeping of accounts? And how does one keep a reckoning of infinity? In any case, an "infinite debt" is almost certain to feel like a stifling and tiresome obligation to both parties, no matter how high-minded their aspirations.

Like the *Epistle of Barnabas*, Kierkegaard seems to be unintentionally contradicting the teaching of the Gospels. The Gospels speak constantly about debts, but inevitably the moral is the *forgiveness* of debts. The Lord's Prayer instructs us to ask God, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). The Greek

word *opheleimata* here literally means “debts” and not “trespasses,” as it’s sometimes rendered. That is, according to the teachings of Christ, Kierkegaard is wrong. It is not a question of accumulating infinite debt (which, if examined, may well uncover a subtle egotism) but rather of canceling *all* debts—one’s own and others’.

This leads to the heart of our inquiry. A debt is a transaction, an exchange in which a cost is incurred. It could be argued that all conventional forms of love are transactional in this way. We discharge debts by our good deeds; we incur them when others bestow kindnesses on us. The exchanges are exact and often rigorous. Here’s another view of love’s “infinite debt,” from Laura Kipnis’s cynical but insightful *Against Love*:

Exchanging obedience for love comes naturally—we were once children after all, whose survival depended on the caprices of love. And thus you have the template for future intimacies: if you love me, you’ll do what I want or need or demand to make me feel secure and complete and I’ll love you back. Thus we grow to demand obedience in our turn, we household dictators and petty tyrants of the private sphere, who are in our turn, dictated to.¹¹

Debt in this sense is not a matter of sin. Nor are the demands for domestic obedience; they are not “trespasses,” because most of these social transactions violate neither the law nor the dictates of morality. Favors and obligations are as much a part of the national currency as the money supply. They are not reckoned on the ledgers of the Federal Reserve, but they are calculated in our minds and hearts. These calculations lead to tremendous confusion about the nature and purpose of love.

It would be easy to launch into a tirade against the coldness of human life, in which everything is computed at a cost and nothing is free and in which personal connections are calculated by an

internal system of double-entry accounting. Most of us tend to experience these limitations as an indignity, although we're usually happy to invoke them on our own behalf when necessary. My point is not to inveigh against this injustice—or rather, against this justice, since the give-and-take of human intercourse is usually rigorously exact. Instead I hope to show that there are dimensions of human existence that can transcend this level of give-and-take and can even be infused into it, enabling us to move past debt and obligation, freeing ourselves as well as others. This is what the Christian tradition means when it speaks of *agape*, sometimes defined as “unconditional love.”

There are, then, two loves. One is calculated, calculating, and exact. In this book I will call it “transactional love” or “worldly love,” since it underlies the operations of ordinary life. The other form is free, spontaneous, joyful, and sometimes capricious; I will call it *agape*, “unconditional love,” or “conscious love.” I am taking the last phrase from the spiritual teacher G. I. Gurdjieff (c. 1866–1949), who taught a version of esoteric Christianity.¹² Gurdjieff wrote:

Love of consciousness evokes the same in response
 Love of feeling evokes the opposite
 Love of body depends only on type and polarity.¹³

These utterances may look obscure, but they make sense in light of the ideas I've sketched out. Why should conscious love “evoke the same in response”? Because it demands nothing and asks nothing. C. S. Lewis, in his celebrated book *The Four Loves*, calls it “gift-love,” and this is correct, as long as we avoid confusing it with the idea of gifts given in the ordinary world, which usually have certain obligations hidden in the packaging. If the gift is genuinely free of the obligation to reciprocate (as few gifts truly are), it will evoke genuine gratitude in response. From this, love—the same kind of love—can arise.

“Love of feeling evokes the opposite.” Love of feeling—emotional love in all its variants—wants to be paid in kind. The recipient senses this demand with her emotional intelligence (which is exquisitely sensitive to such Trojan horses) and sooner or later resents it. It’s frequently true, of course, that the “love of feeling” is mutual. This produces complications that I will discuss in the next chapter.

“Love of body depends only on type and polarity.” Gurdjieff’s statement is both unassailable and fraught with mystery. Anyone who has felt the pull of a beguiling stranger at a party can attest to the power of this attraction. Even so, its workings are as hidden from us as the functioning of our mitochondria. Sacred traditions around the world have developed many different forms of the “science of types,” which attempts to study this attraction. The most common version today is astrology, whose continued popularity, despite the scientists’ relentless contempt, suggests that there is more to this discipline than skeptics admit. But if astrology is not totally fallacious, it’s not foolproof either.

In this book I mean to show that conscious love—love that is beyond transactions—is different, qualitatively rather than quantitatively, from worldly love. It’s well known that the Greek of the New Testament has four words for love (hence Lewis’s title *The Four Loves*). The first is *eros*, or desire, which spans the full gamut of passionate emotions from raw lust to romantic adoration. The second is *storge*, or family love. This word comes from the Greek verb *stergein*, which has the connotation of “putting up with,” which casts a rather droll light on family relations. The third is *philia*, or friendship. The fourth is *agape*.

The vocabulary of ancient Greek thus covers the gamut of human connections fairly thoroughly. English is not so well endowed. We only have one word to encompass this entire spectrum of emotions—or two, if we include the verb *like*. Because these words have to span such a wide range, they create ambiguities and confusions that lead to any amount of unhappiness.

Several years ago, walking ahead of two girls on a busy New York street, I heard a snatch of their conversation. One said to the other, "So I said to him, 'I like you but I don't love you.' So does that mean we should sleep together?" The two girls passed me on the sidewalk and I never heard the friend's reply, but I was struck by the question. It seemed to reflect a real confusion—one that was no doubt very painful to the girl—about the "debt of love": How much does one kind oblige us to feel another? How many times have we held ourselves back from saying "I love you" because we feared that it would be taken in a way we did not mean?

Agape stands apart. It has little regard for social conventions, nor, when viewed from the exterior, does it even necessarily look like love. Christ's behavior in the Gospels exemplifies *agape* in its many dimensions, but he is rarely meek and mild; often he comes across as sharp and abrupt. This Jesus has little to do with the Good Shepherd of sentimental art.

This contrast between *agape* and worldly love helps us peer into love's most elusive mystery: Why should we love at all? Because it feels good? But it doesn't always feel good. Because the social contract demands it? But what happens when society isn't looking? Because God is looking, then? In that case, we are loving only to buy favors from God. The twentieth-century Russian philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev sums the problem up well when he says that in Christianity,

love for men, for neighbors, friends and brothers in spirit, is either denied or interpreted as an ascetic or philanthropic exercise useful for the salvation of one's soul. Personal love for man and for any creature is regarded as positively dangerous for salvation and as leading one away from the love of God. One must harden one's heart against the creature and love God alone. This is why Christians have often been so hard, so cold hearted and unfeeling in the name of virtues

useful for their salvation. Love in Christianity became rhetorical, conventional and hypocritical. There was no human warmth in it.¹⁴

In speaking of this kind of love as an “exercise useful for the salvation of one’s soul,” Berdyaev reminds us that transactionality is not so easy to avoid. Even when it inspires acts that are apparently selfless, the motive of buying favor with God (or avoiding punishment from him) may be hiding under the surface. The love of would-be saints often has a whiff of hypocrisy; they seem to be obeying Christ’s injunction to lay up treasures in heaven as if they were making deposits in a bank. Berdyaev adds, “Ordinary sympathy and compassion is more gracious and more like love than this theological virtue.”¹⁵ An earlier Russian philosopher of love, Vladimir Solovyov, expresses the same sentiment: “This unfortunate spiritual love reminds one of the little angels in old paintings, which have only a head, then wings and nothing more.”¹⁶

Yet “ordinary sympathy and compassion” do exist. When they are present, they seem like the most natural things in the world. Sociobiologists sometimes contend that this altruism is nothing more than the work of selfish genes making sure that other genes like themselves will survive (a subject I’ll discuss in Chapter Four). So it may be, at a certain level. Unfortunately, the present age has been far too accepting of reductionistic answers that drain the blood from our spiritual and emotional lives. If our civilization slits its own throat, the weapon it uses may turn out to be Occam’s razor.

We don’t have to reject the insights of the hard sciences in order to go beyond them. Human life, seen from an ordinary perspective, is proverbially mysterious, so we may feel justified in trying to view it from higher and deeper dimensions. This takes us into the realms of the mystical and the esoteric. While I will go further into these ideas in later chapters, let me at least say here that one of the crucial steps in the journey is to pass through what Christ calls the “strait gate” (Matthew 7:13). At this level of awakening, the individual

self is surpassed, and one realizes that paradoxically, what is most deeply and intimately “I” is precisely the dimension of being that we share with others. The primordial tension between “self” and “other” is thus transcended or simply melts away into a higher Self. This Self is impersonal: it does not belong to us; we belong to it. Plotinus, a Greek philosopher of the third century A.D., alluded to this truth in his dying words: “Strive to bring back the god in yourselves to the God in the All.”¹⁷ Ultimately, the “I” is a “we.”

To pass through this “strait gate” fully and consciously is sometimes called *liberation*. It’s easy to see why. To realize that one’s inmost, truest “I” is universal and thus indestructible in itself sweeps away many of our preoccupations with personal survival, whatever form these may take. This is the truth that sets us free.

At this point love arrives into a totally new dimension. As long as we see ourselves as isolated identities bartering and swapping and squabbling for survival, love will remain trapped on the level of the transactional. But if consciousness awakens to the point where it can identify with the universal mind, it can relax its grasp. It begins to view things from a broader perspective, and what is perhaps most important, it can see the ego from a remove, as one of many egos operating in the world, none of them particularly privileged. At this point one becomes far more capable of kindness and giving that are free of ulterior motives. This perspective is what I identify with conscious love.

The conditions for this awakening are varied and almost limitless. Some people may have a powerful but unbidden experience of the sacred that opens up their awareness suddenly and immediately. (William James, in his classic work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, categorized these as “conversion experiences.”) Others have a glimpse of awakening that then requires many years to develop and integrate. Still others find that they achieve nothing except by dint of many years of deliberate inner work. In the vast majority of cases the process is a long one—usually a matter not of years but of decades.

What I am saying here may seem to imply that conscious love is the prerogative of a spiritual elite. This is not really true. While only a few may have a clear sense of the whole range of steps in this process, the fundamental truth of this higher love underlies much of even everyday behavior. It is probably why Berdyaev's "ordinary sympathy and compassion," without which life would be unendurable, are so common and so natural (as they are, despite our constant complaints to the contrary). It encourages and justifies forgiveness, that mysterious salve that heals so many wounds: "One forgives to the extent that one loves," observed La Rochefoucauld.¹⁸ It may also explain why simple, kind-hearted people often display a goodness that outshines the pretensions of would-be saints.

At the same time, we seem to need more than ordinary goodness and kindness. There is something in the human enterprise that is concerned with increasing consciousness. We not only want to experience something, we also want to know why it is the way it is—and what is still more crucial, we have an unstinting urge to experience it in full awareness, like Odysseus, who had himself lashed to the mast of his ship so he could hear the song of the Sirens. Hence the journey to conscious love could be seen as central to human experience.

If I were to stop here, I would be in full agreement with the mainstream Christian tradition, which almost unanimously proclaims the superiority of *agape* to love in its coarser varieties. And yet like most truths, this is only a partial truth. To see why, it's useful to turn to the meaning of the Greek word *agape*. Liddell and Scott's Greek lexicon makes an often overlooked point about the nuances of this word, noting that *agape* can imply "regard rather than affection."¹⁹ And indeed the usage of this word in the Greek of all periods generally suggests something slightly remote and disinterested. This suggests that the purity of conscious love, taken by itself, can be rather cold and bloodless. Divorced from the

more ambiguous but more engaged “love of the world,” *agape* turns into the arid theological virtue that Berdyaev deplores.

Many wedding ceremonies include a reading of Paul’s famous encomium to love from 1 Corinthians: “Love is patient and kind; love is never boastful,” and so on (1 Corinthians 13:1–13). This passage is almost never read in the King James Version because the King James translates the Greek *agape* here not as “love” but as “charity.” And yet “charity,” with its impersonal, disinterested flavor, is probably closer to the meaning of Paul’s Greek than is “love,” leading one to ask, exactly what sort of love are couples pledging to each other when they get married? Are they being implicitly told to confound one kind of love with another, like the girl I overheard on the street?

It’s hard to see how conscious love, even in its highest reaches, will totally eradicate our urges for human closeness and companionship and sexuality (however much the saints of the world, real and supposed, seem to suggest that this is desirable). There are said to be holy people who have reached such pinnacles of achievement. I have never met any. Ultimately, we are joined to one another by our needs and transactions as much as by anything else, and no degree of sanctity is likely to change this fact. For most of us, probably even the best of us, love comprises an intense, even violent dynamic between an impartial sublimity—the sense “that I was blessed and could bless,”²⁰ as W. B. Yeats put it—and the sizable part of our nature that keeps a watchful eye out for its own interests. It is our very humanity that spans this whole range of feeling, and if we despise and revile one section of it, we risk making ourselves not more but less human.

Conscious love is not, or is not entirely, freedom from drives or passions or self-interest but rather freedom *within* them. It is capable of taking ordinary human relations as they are, in their full nakedness, while at the same time softening and mitigating their harsher aspects. In this process, the world as we experience it

becomes less severe and hard-edged, and reality itself starts to seem more accommodating and malleable.

To see how this can operate in practice, I'll discuss each of the common forms of love—and their relationship to conscious love—in turn. When I set out to write this book, I intended to follow the familiar schema of the four loves, but as I became immersed in writing, that approach did not help me organize my thoughts. I found it more natural to break down the discussion into romantic love, marriage, family love, friendship, and *agape* or conscious love. Even these, however, did not quite fill the bill. It also seemed necessary to discuss love in a more universal sense—compassion and concern for humanity as a whole, particularly as manifested in the drive toward social justice and the role each individual is called to play in this effort. These divisions are perhaps arbitrary, but it would be no less so to organize the discussion around the nuances of Greek terms: language itself, after all, only corresponds in a rough and untidy way to reality.