

Words of Love

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Kierkegaard has consistently been a key figure in discussions of the relation between Christian and secular worldviews. The particular question of the Christian worldview is one of the central facets of his "project," which already presupposes the existence (in Denmark!) of two different ways of seeing the world, "Christianity" and "Christendom."

By extension Kierkegaard's ideas have been applied to the more general problem of incommensurable forms of life, and notably to the issue of religion and secular science. In particular, the "Wittgensteinian fideism" debate has important connections to Kierkegaard.¹

Kierkegaard's own position on these issues is ambiguous. This paper is an attempt to disambiguate it a bit with help from some notions put forward in *Works of Love*. In particular I want to explore his use in that text of the notion of a conceptual transfiguration from essentialism to existentialism.

Some Context

The best known locus of the problem of worldviews in Kierkegaard's writings is Johannes Climacus's appropriation, from Lessing, of the language of an "ugly ditch" between the truths of history and eternal truths.

Lessing has said that contingent historical truths can never become a demonstration of eternal truths of reason, also that the transition whereby one will build an eternal truth on historical reports is a leap. (CUP, 1:93)

Climacus's famous phrasing of Lessing's position actually understates it. Lessing's exact words are "I cannot get across, however often and however earnestly I have tried to make the leap."² In short, Lessing apparently claims that historical truths and eternal verities are incommensurable. Climacus and Kierkegaard have been widely taken to endorse this view.

The radical separation between the secular and the sacred is also evident in *Fear and Trembling* under the guise of the "teleological suspension of the ethical." Rational ethics cannot imagine the possibility of Abraham's dilemma. The very dilemma as Johannes de Silentio poses it, to say nothing of its resolution, depends on a view of things which is rationally incomprehensible (FT, 14, 60, etc.).

Something of this flavor of incommensurability also comes through in the sermon found in the "ultimatum" of *Either/Or*. The pastor makes an ultimate distinction between earthly and Divine love and constancy. The demand to recognize that one is always in the wrong seems an attempt to drive the existing person into a position of incommensurability with respect to the world (EO, II:350).

The entire framework of the "stages" of existence, as it appears (at least on the surface) in *Either/Or* and the *Stages*, reinforces this notion of incommensurability. The

terminology of stages suggests a linear model, such that one could hardly comprehend more than one stage at a time.

At the same time each of these works raises the question of incommensurability in another way, by assuming the possibility of transition between the seemingly incommensurable perspectives. Climacus takes up Lessing's challenge and describes in some detail the 'leap of faith' which would be required to cross the ugly ditch. de Silentio stands in awe of Abraham's accomplishment. The pastor is sure that he will make his point understandable to every peasant (EO, II:338). Judge William's proximity is certainly based on the assumption that he is able to communicate with A.

Whatever one may think of Judge William's project, or the pastor's, de Silentio's or Climacus's, we might well wonder what *Kierkegaard* thinks of the possibility of communication between worldviews. This question is often considered with regard to Kierkegaard's ideas on "indirect communication." I have taken a crack or two at that myself, but such a procedure involves various problems and side issues about the pseudonyms, the authorship, and particularly the adequacy of Kierkegaard's overview of it.

A more direct approach to the issue is to look at Kierkegaard's approach to bridging worldviews in an acknowledged work. *Works of Love* provides an excellent opportunity. As one of Kierkegaard's more concrete religious writings, it is (at least ostensibly)³ directed from an openly Christian author toward a Christian audience, and addresses issues particular to the situation of that audience. Thus this work presumably embodies Kierkegaard's understanding of the religious worldview. It might cast some light on the question of incommensurability as seen from this point of view. Certainly several of the discourses include explicit "deliberations" (Kierkegaard's term) on the problem of incommensurable language.

To focus on this aspect of *Works of Love* also raises a point about Kierkegaard's communicative strategies. The usual concentration on indirect communication and the pseudonymous authorship may obscure the fact that the acknowledged authorship has its own complexities. A look at these complexities is a useful reminder concerning the problems of communication within the religious life.

The Problem Stated

Before the text has properly begun, *Works of Love* raises the problem of incommensurability, and calls attention to the difficulties of communication about the incommensurable. Kierkegaard's preface ends by renouncing any claim to adequacy of description. Love is essentially inexhaustible, present in its totality everywhere and in every one of its works. Thus the slightest work of love participates in an infinite essence. As such it is "essentially indescribable" (WL, 3).

The opening prayer complicates the issue further. "There are indeed only some works that human language specifically and narrowly calls works of love, but in heaven no work can be pleasing unless it is a work of love, sincere in self-renunciation..." (WL, 4). As an address to God Kierkegaard's words are something of an advance retraction of the book. Moreover they cut the notion of "works of love" adrift from its everyday usage. If the earthly criterion is to be abandoned, what could it mean to call anything a "work of love"? And failing an adequate definition for the central term, how can we presume to discourse about works of love? Has not Kierkegaard undercut himself before he starts?⁴

One way of reading *Works of Love* is as an extended response to that very question. To keep this paper manageable, I want to focus on three of the discourses, in which

Kierkegaard explicitly treats linguistic considerations: "Love Builds Up," "Love's Hidden Life," and "Love Believes All Things."

Spiritual Metaphor in "Love Builds Up"

"Love Builds Up" provides the framework of Kierkegaard's thinking on earthly and heavenly language. He begins the discourse by remarking that all human speech about the spiritual is essentially metaphorical (WL, 209). Humans are not conscious of themselves as spirit from the first, and they begin life in the sensate-psychical mode. Thus the development of language and concepts takes place in this mode. The sensate-psychical is taken over by spirit and "becomes the metaphorical." Those who have made the transition to the spiritual use the same words, but there is a world of difference in their usage. The spiritually self-aware person remains in the visible world, and also in everyday language. The spiritual person's existential "denial" of the sensate-psychical is not manifest within the sensate, but hidden, like that of the Knight of Faith (WL, 210; cf FT, 39).

The terminology of "building up" is advanced by Kierkegaard as a case in point of sensate language appropriated metaphorically for spiritual use. The very fact of this spiritual appropriation is seen by Kierkegaard as "upbuilding": the old and familiar is reappropriated and revived, with no need to "go further" and create novelty for its own sake (WL, 210).

Kierkegaard next proceeds to construct the spiritual metaphor of building up through a detailed discussion of the etymology of "build up" in ordinary Danish. "Building up" implies building from the foundation, and thus in depth. Ramshackle additions are built on, but not built up. Castles in the air may be built, but are not built up (WL 210-12).

In the spiritual metaphoric usage, this foundational building is characteristic of love. Whatever is done in love is upbuilding (WL, 212). There is no characteristic word of upbuilding, and no word is incapable of upbuilding. There is no particular requirement of technical excellence in order to be upbuilding. Many things may be upbuilding. The common thread holding the upbuilding together is that love is present. Love is the spiritual foundation or ground, on which all is built (WL 213).⁵

The foundational quality of love, as it is manifest in humans, presupposes that love has been implanted in others by the Spirit. Love is already there, and could not have been implanted by an existing human. It is incumbent on us to accept this presupposition, and to be prepared to "love forth love" in the other (WL 217). The work of love here is not a work *on* the other, and so at this point the spiritual metaphor loses its specific parallelism. Earthly building up is an action on another. Spiritual building up is an action on the self, the action of presupposing. Kierkegaard buttresses this claim with the description of love in I Corinthians 13. He goes through the various attributes listed there and shows how they all relate to love as presupposed. For instance, love is patient - and does not demand instant response from the other; love does not seek its own - but allows room in the other; love believes all things - even what is not immediately evident (WL 219-221).

But what then is love? Love is to presuppose love; to have love is to presuppose love in others; to be loving is to presuppose that others are loving. (WL 223)

In short, love is not a quality of being in and for itself (like wisdom) but is a quality of being for others. The sensate grammar does not recognize this distinction, but the spiritual grammar does.

By the end of this "upbuilding discourse" on works of love, Kierkegaard has effected a nearly complete transformation in the terms at issue. Beginning with the concrete, he has made spiritual metaphors of the three central terms 'upbuilding,' 'work' and 'love.' Upbuilding is changed from an external to a personal, spiritual process. Works are relocated from the physically active to the spiritual and reflective mode. Love is transformed from an active and selfish principle, to a presupposition oriented toward the other.

The notion of "spiritual metaphor" and its application in this discourse serves, at the least, to make manifest the difficulties of direct religious communication. These difficulties are partly a function of the existential situation of Christians. Community and communication have their root in the sensate life. Thus even a willing audience requires a distinct shaking of the categories if it is to hear of Christianity. The fact that Kierkegaard models such a telling does show that it is possible. But the possibility is not based on an *essential* conceptualization of the terms used; rather it depends on an *existential* access through metaphor. In this sort of discourse compact essential definitions are "essentially impossible." Their place is taken by thick, discursive demonstrations. Such an existential definition process demands exactly the prolix repetition of "what we all know" which is manifest in *Works of Love*.

"Love's Hidden Life" As A Response to Positivism

Kierkegaard's examples of differences in spiritual and sensate grammar raise a new question. If spiritual and sensate-psychical persons use the same words, how are we to distinguish them? Indeed, how are we to know that there is a spiritual realm? Kierkegaard asserts love as the foundation of this realm, but he is very careful to claim also that it does not do a new thing in the sensate dimension.

A positivist would respond to this question by simply denying the existence of the spiritual, or at least collapsing spiritual talk into the sensate realm. However discredited the "logical" version of positivism may be, the general tendency of empirical reductionism is certainly alive and well. Kierkegaard has even made the positivist's job easier by denying the need for a radically new language of the spiritual. Given that the language is identical, the positivist's charge of misfiring metaphor is at its strongest.

Kierkegaard is certainly cognizant of this issue. Indeed the first discourse in the first series, "Love's Hidden Life and Its Recognizability by Its Fruits," might as well be directly addressed to positivism.

If it were so, as conceited sagacity, proud of not being deceived, thinks, that we should believe nothing that we cannot see with our physical eyes, then we first and foremost ought to give up believing in love. If we were to do so and do it out of fear lest we be deceived, would we not then be deceived? (WL, 5)

Appearances can be deceiving, but among these deceiving appearances is the appearance of being "absolutely secure against deceit." Here Kierkegaard's line of argument distinctly foreshadows William James's comments in *The Will to Believe*, directed against the W. K. Clifford school of "belief on the evidence."[6](#)

Kierkegaard's argument runs somewhat deeper than James's in that James relies on the conditional and subjunctive. James provides some details about the use of belief in science and practical life, but his position on religion roughly follows Pascal's Wager. He claims that if religion were true it would be folly to ignore it. He then rejects any epistemology which would require one to ignore religion.[7](#) But he does not propose any immediate positive evidence. Kierkegaard boldly asserts that love will be known by its own fruit, an unmistakable manifestation though not necessarily to the eyes.

Kierkegaard further distinguishes between the spiritual fruit and the leaves. Each tree has its characteristic leaf, but even so a tree which does not bear fruit is not a proper token of the species. "To what can we better compare this love in words and platitudes than to the leaves of the tree; words and phrases and the inventions of language may be a mark of love, but that is uncertain" (WL, 11). Kierkegaard does not wish to recommend undue taciturnity. But words hastily spoken, like leaves torn off prematurely, render the tree unable to bear fruit. Love, like certain plants, must "form a heart" before it bears fruit.

The corollary of this need, as Kierkegaard also noted in "Love Builds Up," is that there is no word which is an unconditional mark of love. Indeed there is no *work* which is an unconditional mark of love. Opposite words, diverse works, may be marks of love. All depends on how the word is said, how the work is done (WL, 13). Ron Hall has called this a requirement of "reflexive integrity."⁸

Yet in extending the ambiguity from words to works, Kierkegaard removes the most obvious criterion of reflexive integrity. This is not unintentional. In a final spiritual twist on the grammar of fruits, he adjusts the metaphor of fruiting in a spiritual or inner direction. The exhortation to works of love is primarily in an inner direction: to make one's works such as *could* be known, rather than to ensure that they *are* known. One is not to seek mean-spiritedly for others' fruit. One is rather to look to one's own fruits. Furthermore, it is no virtue to see the lack of fruit in another: the fruit of seeing another charitably is among the most sacred (WL, 14-16).

In this discourse, Kierkegaard again makes spiritual metaphors of the central terms. "Fruits" are transformed from a public, external criterion to an internal one. "Recognizability" becomes a subjective criterion, an exhortation to the individual for internal accountability rather than a call for standards of public recognition. The very idea of reflexive integrity, which in a "speech act" theory would generally refer to public fulfillment, is necessarily changed by the assertion that no particular work can bear the necessary weight of proof. Along the way Kierkegaard also makes spiritual metaphors of the concepts of need and riches. The need of love, the need to be known by this fruit, is enriching (and itself a fruit of love). One is poorer for not needing love (WL 11).

The redescription of fruits presented here cuts the ground out from under positivism by shifting the focus from the external and essential to the existential realm. This strategy parallels and depends on the communicative strategy suggested above. For positivism love should be "essentially recognizable" through some Platonic quality in which all its works would participate. Kierkegaard's existential analysis rejects this criterion. In so doing it defers judgements of recognition (especially as regards others), perhaps infinitely. But the infinite deferral of judgement does not imply the infinite deferral of the signified. Instead it brings this signified infinitely nearer, by transforming it from an external to an internal and existential quality.

Knowledge, Belief and Mistrust

"Love Believes All Things - and Yet Is Never Deceived" continues the anti-positivist thread. In this discourse Kierkegaard sharpens the distinction between knowledge and interpretation.

Light mindedness, inexperience, naïveté believe everything that is said; vanity, conceit, complacency believe everything flattering that is said; envy, malice, corruption believe everything evil that is said; mistrust believes nothing at all; experience will teach that it is most sagacious not to believe everything - but love believes all things. (WL, 226)

A glance at everyday life suggests that most people operate out of a compromise between faith and mistrust. Yet such a compromise almost inevitably degenerates into simple mistrust. Mistrust misuses knowledge. It converts what everyone knows into a belief, ". . . since everyone who has the same knowledge must *necessarily* come to the same conclusion."

The deception is that *from* knowledge (the pretense and the falsity are that it is by virtue of knowledge) mistrust concludes, assumes, and believes what it concludes, assumes, and believes *by virtue* of the disbelief inherent in mistrust, whereas *from* the same knowledge, *by virtue* of belief, one can conclude, assume, and believe the very opposite. (WL 227)

When the appropriate grammar of knowledge, belief and mistrust is clarified, the individual who must judge and choose between them is disclosed in her choice. "To live is to judge oneself," and to judge others is to make a particular kind of judgement on oneself (WL 228).

Kierkegaard claims that love is as knowledgeable as mistrust - neither is naïve. Sagacity fears error, but sees only one kind of error as possible. Truly to fear being in error means willingness to believe (WL 232). Only vanity - fearing to appear in public as stupid or deceived - takes the more conservative position of mistrust.[9](#)

The knowledgeable yet trusting sort of love is contrasted with the reciprocal, bartering love which demands immediate gratification. Such love really amounts to self-love (WL 237). Love in Kierkegaard's sense can believe all without being deceived because it does not lack knowledge, but simply insists on taking a particular existential stance.

In this discourse Kierkegaard once again transforms the key terms into spiritual metaphors. In particular he asserts a specific relation of judgement, knowledge, and belief. Knowledge is claimed as temporally prior, a *sine qua non*. But it does not incline to judgement without some prior degree of belief. Thus belief is not (as in common usage) reducible to credulity or naïve lack of judgement. Just as the significant fruits are not others' but one's own, the important dimension of judgement is its reflection on the judge, rather than external judgmental accuracy. He also focuses again on the transition from self-serving love to charity.

Here *Works of Love* fulfills Kierkegaard's promise of a book on sociality (JP, 5972) in a distinctively Kierkegaardian way. The vision of community presented is roughly that everyone should mind their own spiritual business with charity toward all. Even community is transformed in spiritual metaphor. The sensate term suggests an essential or quasi-physical relationship - the neighbor as nearest, to be peered at through the blinds! Spiritual metaphor relocates community to the existential - the universal neighbor as metaphor for the self (WL, 23).

Conceptual Transfiguration

What does the foregoing tell us about "works of love"? If nothing else, the grammatical realignments, which Kierkegaard has suggested in the discourses considered above, serve to support his earlier claim about the otherness of heavenly works of love. If we read God's works according to the same principles Kierkegaard has recommended in our earthly relations, we will have at least an implicit theodicy. The call to focus on the internal, subjective judgement of love, rather than the essence of sensate fruits, opens up *all* of God's works as works of love.

These themes are carried out with a vengeance in the *Upbuilding Discourse* "One Who Prays Aright Struggles in Prayer and Is Victorious - in That God is Victorious." This is

another of Kierkegaard's works in which the notion of spiritual metaphor is strikingly evident. Here he adjusts the grammar of prayer by making spiritual metaphors of several familiar terms. 'Victory' becomes consistent with loss. The 'benefit' of prayer is said to be beyond "an angel, speaking with the tongue of an angel" to communicate to the sensate person (EUD 381), since it involves new understandings of 'duty,' 'reward,' and the 'conciliatory spirit' (EUD 380). Prayer is said to be 'struggle.' There is a distinction between sensate and infinite 'certainty.' Most important (and possibly key to the others) is the change in 'change' (EUD 393). One may begin prayer in the hopes of changing God, or at least of gaining an explanation (changing the state of one's knowledge). But through prayer what one actually gains (if it is done aright) is a transfiguration of God, a new relationship through a new and deeper understanding and faith (EUD 400). Such a transfiguration is exactly what the spiritual re-readings suggested in *Works of Love*, taken together, would engender. The change which Kierkegaard calls transfiguration is not an essential change (which, having regard to the eternal nature of God, is essentially impossible). It is instead an existential or relational change, a change in the relation of the self to itself, and to the power which constituted it (SUD, 131).

Parallels in the Pseudonymous Works

Parallel notions of transfiguration and spiritual metaphor are evident in the various pseudonymous works mentioned earlier. For instance, *Fear and Trembling's* "teleological suspension of the ethical" transfigures the ethical by shifting the focus away from the external and sensate relation to a universal essence of morality, and toward a relation focused on existential construction of an internal, spiritual sense.

Returning to *Either/Or*, it should be clear that the Judge's picture of concentric stages incarnates the same insight of spiritual metaphor. Judge William's assertion is that marriage, far from annihilating aesthetic love, "transfigures" it in a "higher concentricity" (EO, II:31, II:47). This is not an essential change but an existential completion. The pastor's views of love are strikingly similar to those presented in *Works of Love*. This is perhaps not surprising, given the similarity between the sermon of the "Ultimatum" and Kierkegaard's discourse "The Joy of It That in Relation to God a Person Always Suffers as Guilty," which like *Works of Love* was published in 1847 (UDVS, 264-88).

Existential Conclusion

The notion of spiritual metaphor, in its concept and application, shows Kierkegaard's way past the impasse of incommensurability for the audience of believers. The impasse for this group is largely due to the fact that God's ways are not human ways. Humans raised in the sensate mode must feel their way into the spiritual, and they are likely to be hampered by the metaphorical access which is the only way of reaching it.

Wittgenstein has pointed out that everyday grammar raises essentialist expectations. He also noted that the ordinary difficulties are redoubled in the religious realm.¹⁰ The language of "works" is a good example of such a difficulty.

Kierkegaard's spiritual metaphor transfigures the religious language of works in existential possibility. Christians are urged to turn away from the sensate focus on the material and verification, toward an inward focus on the individual and the principle of charity. Only through such a transfiguration does the language make Christian sense.

Philosophical Conclusion

The theoretical issues raised in the *Postscript* are also brought into focus (though not to a definitive and essential resolution) through the notions developed in *Works of Love*. In

contrast to the believer's practical confusion, the philosophical impasse is a conceptual one.

Works of Love helps with this impasse by both claiming and showing that linguistic transition between worldviews is possible, based on spiritual metaphor. If this idea is accepted, Lessing/Climacus's ugly ditch, which is "essentially" present, is not unbridgeable for existing and language-using individuals. Yet the metaphorical nature of the bridge, and its articulation in the realm of existential spirit, give it an unexpected kind of power. It does not eliminate the ditch, nor provide a universal road. The road must be existentially appropriated. Thus such prolix and uncertain devices as indirect communication remain necessary.

This is hardly a startling conclusion. We all know that the sort of communication suggested and practiced in *Works of Love* is existentially possible. Attention to our own experience will bring to mind countless examples. Nevertheless, we are tempted by conceptual schemes, which assert the *essential* impossibility of this communication.

In the context of these temptations, *Works of Love* is an important reminder to philosophers. Kierkegaard, a self-conscious and fundamentally reliable practitioner of the discourse of inter-worldview communication, shows us how it is done. He is a valuable signpost on the road to conceptual clarity.

Notes

1. For famous examples of these themes, see Kai Nielsen, "Wittgensteinian Fideism," *Philosophy* 42 (July 1967); Alasdair MacIntyre, "Is Understanding Religion Compatible with Believing," in *Rationality*, ed. Bryan R. Wilson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979). A recent and excellent discussion of this issue is Yong Huang, "Foundation of Religious Beliefs After Foundationalism: Wittgenstein Between Nielsen and Phillips," *Religious Studies* 31 (1995): 251-67.
2. Gotthold Lessing, *Lessing's Theological Writings*, ed. and trans. Henry Chadwick (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957), 55.
3. On this point see Gene Fendt, *Works of Love? Reflections on "Works of Love"* (Potomac, MD: Scripta Humanistica, 1990?).
4. This idea is suggested in Fendt, 7, 17.
5. There is a distinct echo here of Kant's claim that only good will is truly good, and other gifts are only instrumental.
6. William James, *The Will to Believe* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1897; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 11.
7. *Ibid.*, 28.
8. See Ronald L. Hall, *Word and Spirit: A Kierkegaardian Critique of the Modern Age* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). The key points with respect to reflexive integrity also appear in Ronald L. Hall, "Spirit and Presence: A

Kierkegaardian Analysis," in *Either/Or, I*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), 271- 85.

9.

Compare William James's association of "shunning error" with positivism, and "believing truth" with religion. James, *Will to Believe*, 18.

10.

See the well-known Lectures on Religious Belief, in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).