

In *Works of Love*, Søren Kierkegaard professes that (Christian) love is the bridge between the temporal and the eternal.¹ More specifically, he asserts that undertaking to unconditionally obey the Christian tenet “You Shall Love The Neighbour” facilitates the individual to overcome finiteness and move towards her/his eternal God-relation. Yet, can loving the neighbour be properly commanded within the context of a written formulation? That is, can Kierkegaard properly communicate this command within the framework of the relationship he creates between himself and his reader? To the end of resolving these central questions, I will begin by briefly explicating his argument for the unconditional duty to love the neighbour as a means for achieving eternal freedom. Second, I will demonstrate how Kierkegaard’s relationship with the reader ultimately undermines his attempt to speak directly to the single individual as a subject of this command. Lastly, I will present evidence for the conclusion that his inability to effectually demand the reader to love the neighbour need not diminish his work insofar as the chief aim of his writing can itself be perceived as an attempt on the part of Kierkegaard to execute his own works of love.

I. You Shall Love The Neighbour

The first of the series of Christian works of love that Kierkegaard advances is the unconditional obedience to the command “You Shall Love The Neighbor.” According to Kierkegaard, it is only through deference to this duty that the reader can secure eternal independence. But, one might interject, how can freedom be made manifest in the act of being forced to obey an imperative? After all, being compelled to fulfil a demand seems counterintuitive to our commonplace notion of the exercise of freedom. Kierkegaard begins by explaining that deriving security through forms of non-Christian² love such as friendship and

erotic love rely wholly on the permanence of a set of preferential inclinations between two individuals. So, for example, my obtaining happiness from preferential love depends completely on the object of my adoration simultaneously singling me out as the subject of her/his adoration as well. As Kierkegaard asserts, “Spontaneous [preferential] love makes a person free and at the next moment dependent”.³ But it is precisely the discrimination that is made manifest in preferential love that denies it from obtaining security in the eternal. As such, this kind of non-Christian love resides in a constant state of susceptibility to the possibility of change (i.e., the other person ceasing to have preferential inclinations towards me, my developing affections for someone else, the death of one of the involved individuals, etc). In short, because preferential love remains vulnerable to change, it can only be affirmed in the temporal realm (i.e., from moment to moment), and thus cannot secure eternal freedom for the individual agent.

Unlike friendship and erotic love, Kierkegaard continues, the Christian imperative “You Shall Love the Neighbor” removes the possibility of my love being undermined for it demands that I love each and every individual unconditionally. He elaborates that Christian love for the neighbour transcends the possibility of the kinds of changes that friendship and erotic love are susceptible to since the neighbour is every individual and thus does not exhibit preference. As he states, “No change, however, can take the neighbor from you, because it is not the neighbor who holds you fast, but it is your love that holds the neighbor fast...Death cannot deprive you of the neighbor, for if it takes one, life immediately gives you another”.⁴ Furthermore, since the imperative commands *unconditional* love, it cancels out the possibility of this love being undercut by a dependence on the neighbour having this or that inclination. This is so by virtue of the fact that Christian love for the neighbour is not based on a reciprocal condition; one is commanded to love the neighbour independent of the neighbour’s behaviour towards oneself.

Rather, the love for the neighbour remains constant insofar as it is pitted in an unconditional duty to an unremitting God who acts as the middle-term between the Christian lover and the

whom the imperative is addressed. That is to say that I can only overcome my temporality by self-identifying as a “You” that “Shall Love the Neighbor”. Hence Kierkegaard’s imperative formulation of the command. That is, by perpetually addressing the reader as a “You,” Kierkegaard in effect singles out the reader as that individual who is personally responsible for satisfying the imperative; the command is written such that it elicits the self-identification by the reader as a You who is subject to fulfilling the command. In formulating the command in this way, Kierkegaard further motivates the reader to identify her/himself as a Christian lover (of the neighbour). As he describes the similar method taken by the writers of the Gospel Scripture, “those sacred words of that text...are rather spoken admonishingly to the single individual, to you, my listener, and to me, to encourage him [the reader] not to allow his love to become unfruitful.” And again, “when the Gospel speaks, it speaks to the single individual. It does not speak *about* us human beings, you and me, but speaks *to* us human beings, to you and me.”⁹

Yet, in identifying myself (the reader) as the “You” who is commanded under the imperative to love my neighbour, I must also necessarily recognize myself as an “I”, namely, the I that is the Christian lover. That is, in accepting the responsibility of being the You in the I-You relation with Kierkegaard,¹⁰ the reader simultaneously becomes the I in the I-You relation with the neighbour. But if the neighbour is supposed to be the “first you,” then how can I also readily identify myself as the You, namely, the You that is subject to the command “You Shall Love The Neighbor?” That is to say that so long as I am engaged in an author-reader relationship within the context of the book, I am already assuming the You identity and thus cannot readily transpose the You to another party, namely, the Christian neighbour, without compromising the force of the imperative upon me.

In fact, it seems that the command cannot be effectually articulated within the context of

any I-You relationship. After all, an I-You relation is necessarily erected by the mere utterance of the command. Rather, the command to love the neighbour must either be communicated outside the context of any relationship with any other person or must otherwise be communicated via a third-party description of the reader. But it seems non-sensical to even speak of communicating anything outside of the context of a relationship since the very act of communicating presupposes an existing relationship between two or more parties. Therefore, it seems that Kierkegaard is left to adopt the latter alternative where he describes the reader from the third-person description. Yet such an approach still obviously compromises the force of the imperative insofar as it does not compel the reader to self-identify as the single individual who is responsible for carrying out the command to love the neighbour. As Kierkegaard himself attests to the importance of the imperative form of address in Christianity, “[For] every one of Christ’s answers... it is infinitely important that it is Christ who said it, and when it is told to the single individual, it is to *him* that it is told. The whole emphasis of eternity rests on this, that it is to him, even though it is told in that way to all individuals.”¹¹

One might object that, strictly speaking, the command does *not* require the reader to simultaneously be a You who falls subject to the command and an I who must discover and love another You (the neighbour). After all, loving the neighbour is rooted in the obedience to a duty prescribed by God who is the middle term between the reader and the neighbour, but loving God (i.e., via the work of love in unconditionally obeying His commands) is just a richer form of self-love. As he states, “Christianity teaches that love is a relationship between: a person – God – a person, that is, that God is the middle term...[And] To love God is to love oneself truly.”¹² In other words, one might contend that because the act of loving the neighbour is ultimately rooted in a love for self, it does not require the You (who shall love the neighbour) to posit another You

identity on somebody else and, thus, does not compromise the force of the imperative upon the reader.

Nevertheless, it seems that Kierkegaard must maintain that the love for the neighbour subsists, at least to some extent, beyond an extension of self-love. That is, the lover-neighbour affiliation must necessarily take the form of an I-You relation; recall that the only way that loving the neighbour can be an act of self-denial¹³ is if this love cannot be wholly translated into a love for self. That this is so is reinforced further in Kierkegaard's own elucidation of the relationship between the Christian lover and her/his neighbour. As he states, "passionate preferential love is another form of self-love,...self-denial's love, *in contrast*, loves the neighbor."¹⁴ And again, "but the beloved [object of preferential love] he loves *as himself* is not the neighbor; the beloved is the *other I*...[whereas] the neighbor is the *first you*."¹⁵ Hence it seems that Kierkegaard cannot effectively communicate the command in its imperative form in the absence of failing to make the reader into a You who shall love the neighbour.

III. Kierkegaard's Work of Love

However, it is questionable whether Kierkegaard is even trying to directly communicate the command to the reader at all. As he asserts, "O my listener, it is not *you* to whom *I* am speaking; it is *I* to whom eternity says: *You* shall."¹⁶ But, one might ask, why would he explicitly deny any participation in an I-You relationship with the reader and, at the same time, insist on employing these indexical predicates in his writing? The answer seems to lie in the understanding of Kierkegaard's writing as the product of his using the process of authorship to execute his own works of love.¹⁷ As he confesses, "being an author is my only work and my only task."¹⁸ He explains in the second part of the book, for example, that a true work of love

does not seek its own. Rather, the true Christian gives love in self-denial such that the recipient does not recognize the Christian lover as the giver because, otherwise, the lover runs the risk of making the recipient dependent on the giver.¹⁹ Thus, if the above mentioned interpretation of *Works of Love* as a manifestation of Kierkegaard's own works of love is accepted, then one would expect his writing to also reflect an intention to deny himself recognition by the reader so as to ensure that his teachings are followed for their own sake. As he describes God and the apostle, "As soon as he sees that he can win them [the people] in such a way that they become devoted to him but misunderstand him and distort his doctrine, he will promptly thrust us away - in order to win them."²⁰

Hence the I-You association that Kierkegaard explicitly refers to throughout the text is neither representative of the relationship between he and the reader nor that between God and the reader but rather speaks to the relationship that he is striving to establish between God and himself. As such, the text itself can be understood as an attempt by Kierkegaard to erect a divine middle-term between he and the reader; the book can be perceived as a manifestation of the divine middle-term. It is precisely in convincing the reader that the I-You relation is *not* between he and the reader but, rather, between he and God, that he can deny himself the recognition of the I in an I-You relationship with the reader and, in turn, accomplish an authentic work or task of love through authorship. Furthermore, in directing his work of love (i.e., his writing the book) in this way, Kierkegaard in effect distances the reader from himself and, in doing so, creates the space he needs to journey inwards and praise love. In "thrusting" the reader away, he denies himself the outward recognition of an author and converts himself into the "nothing" and the "unworthy servant" that he must become before he can properly do the work of praising love.²¹

In conclusion, Kierkegaard maintains that the key to overcoming one's temporality and

achieving eternal freedom is to obey the Christian tenet “You Shall Love The Neighbor.” He purposefully formulates the command in the imperative so as to provoke the reader to usurp the responsibility of fulfilling it. But it is not clear that Kierkegaard can effectually communicate this command in the context of the reader-author relationship without compromising the force of the imperative upon the reader. Specifically, it is not clear how the reader can both self-identify as the You who is commanded by the imperative and transpose the You identity to the neighbour. Nonetheless, if his writing is itself perceived as an attempt to perform his own works of love, then perhaps it was never Kierkegaard’s aim to directly communicate the imperative but rather to deny himself outward recognition and thus speak only *indirectly* to the single individual reader.

1 Kierkegaard, Soren. 1995. Works of Love. Edited and Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. (Pg. 6)

2 For the sake of completeness, it should be noted that Kierkegaard does not suggest that friendship and erotic love are *contrary* or, fundamentally opposed to Christianity. Rather, he simply maintains that they do not facilitate the individual to move close to her/his eternal God-relation.

3 Kierkegaard. Pg. 38.

4 Kierkegaard. Pg. 65.

5 Kierkegaard. Pg. 38. Italics original.

6 Kierkegaard. Pg. 51.

7 But, one might object, if preferential love is undermined by the reliance on an Other, then how can this be a form of self love? Kierkegaard’s response is that even though it is a form of love for the “I”, it is still a love for the “Other I”. (Pg. 57)

8 Kierkegaard. Pg. 54.

9 Kierkegaard. Pg. 14. Italics original.

10 This I-You relation between Kierkegaard and the reader can be equally conceived of as an I-You relation

between God and the reader insofar as Kierkegaard is merely propagating His commands.

- 11 Kierkegaard. Pg. 97. Italics original. In the last section of this paper, we will see later that Kierkegaard ultimately overcomes this obstacle by positing God as the middle term between he and the reader. In doing so, he manages to both communicate the command within the context of his I-You relationship with God and speak (albeit indirectly) to the reader.
- 12 Kierkegaard. Pg. 107. Italics original.
- 13 For, as Kierkegaard professes, “Christian love is self-denial’s love”. (Pg. 52)
- 14 Kierkegaard. Pg. 53. Emphasis added.
- 15 Kierkegaard. Pg. 57. Italics original.
- 16 Kierkegaard. Pg. 90. Italics original.
- 17 Additional support for this interpretation can be found on pg. xiv in the historical introduction by Hong and Hong.
- 18 Kierkegaard. Pg. 73.
- 19 Kierkegaard. Pg. 275.
- 20 Kierkegaard. Pg. 367.
- 21 Kierkegaard. Pg. 365.
