



Philosophy of Religion

The Role of Love in the Thought of Kant and Kierkegaard

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ABSTRACT: Following Ronald Green's suggestion concerning Kierkegaard's dependence upon Kant, I show how Kierkegaard drew upon Kant's *The Metaphysics of Morals* in order to develop his own doctrine of divine love. Where Kant saw only a peripheral role for love in the moral life, we will see how Kierkegaard places love at the center of human life in *Works of Love*. The leap of faith requires that every aspect of life be informed by love in response to God's love for us.

Introduction

In his work, *Kant and Kierkegaard: The Hidden Debt*, Ronald Green has shown how Kant's analysis of the existence of evil in *Religion Within the Bounds of Reason Alone* influenced Kierkegaard's thought, an influence that he thinks Kierkegaard tried to hide. (1) According to Green, it was Kant who first explored the role of anxiety (Angst) in our experience of ethical guilt. Kierkegaard's insight was that Kant's philosophy did not have the resources to overcome the redoubled anxiety he called despair because moral law was for Kant the highest norm to which he could appeal. But the moral law is an impersonal norm that binds imperfect human beings to the unbending strictures of pure reason.

I would like to suggest that the real fault in Kant's philosophy in this regard lies in the fact that there seems to be no important role for love to play in human life. In this essay I will explore the role of love in the thought of Kant and Kierkegaard. I will first consider Kant's treatment of love in *The Metaphysics of Morals*. I will then take up the role of love in Kierkegaard's thought, focusing on his *Works of Love*.

My view is that Kierkegaard's leap of faith introduces the transcendence of divine love. This not only brings the moral law down to earth, so to speak, but it does so paradoxically by introducing a demand to love which is beyond human possibility. But this is the paradox of faith that Kierkegaard insists upon. We are unable to live with the abstract demand of the moral law which is of our own making. By the same token, we are unable to live without it. Kierkegaard shows that whether we adopt the ethical sphere of existence or refrain from doing so, by living the life of an aesthete, we fall into despair. It is only because the demands of divine love lie beyond human possibility that our existence is raised beyond the spiritual death of despair.

Following Ronald Green's suggestion concerning Kierkegaard's dependence upon Kant, I show how Kierkegaard drew upon Kant's work, *The Metaphysics of Morals* in order to develop his own doctrine of divine love. Where Kant saw only a peripheral role for love in the moral life, we will see how Kierkegaard places love at the center of human life. The leap of faith requires that every aspect of life be informed by love in response to God's love for us.

The Role of Love in Kant's Philosophy

It is well-known that Kant thought of his critical philosophy as not only saving the empirical science represented in Newton's physics but also as making room for faith. (2) Kant also gave hope an important role in his critical project. The third great question of the critical philosophy is, What can I hope for? But the third of the traditional theological virtues seems to be conspicuous by its absence from Kant's thought. We should consider whether a philosophy that cannot find a central place for love can be humanly satisfying.

First, with respect to the love of men in Kant's philosophy, we should note his attitude toward human inclination in ethics. Kant's duty-centered ethic often contrasts duty with self-love as a form of inclination. Kant insists that the moral law demands that we act for the sake of duty and not out of inclination. This must have the effect of subordinating love to the ethical demand to simply respect others. As Kant asserts,

Whatever increases self-love ought to be rejected from moral philosophy, and only that ought to be commanded which makes one worthy of respect, e.g., doing one's duty to oneself, righteousness and conscientiousness; these things may not make us objects of love, but we can hold our head high, though not defiantly, and look men straight in the eye, for we have worth. (3)

In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant wrestled with the problem associated with having a duty to love. Here he asserts that love, in the sense of a delight in the perfection of other men (*amor complacentiae*), is a feeling and so cannot be commanded as a duty. But benevolence (*amor benevolentiae*) is a duty. Kant holds that the virtue of benevolence is often called love, but this is an inappropriate use of the term. A feeling of love might become associated with the person who is the object of benevolence, but the duty to be benevolent is valid even if we do not love the person. So, the love that is a feeling of delight in another person is not a duty and cannot be commanded. But the love of others that is called benevolence is a duty. Here the term 'love' means the maxim of benevolence that results in beneficence. (4)

Now, Kant argues that love and respect are feelings that accompany duties we have to others. Love is associated with duties to others that put others under obligation. Respect is associated with duties to others that do not place an obligation on others. Although they can exist separately, they are always united by the law into one duty, the one feeling being dominant in a given case and the other being an accessory to it. It is the union of love and respect in Kant's ethical theory that has the effect of limiting the principle of love so that it cannot act as a source of transcendence, as it does for Kierkegaard. An Example that Kant gives is illuminating,

So we shall acknowledge that we are under obligation to help a poor man; but since the favor we do implies that his well-being depends on our generosity, and this humbles him, it is our duty to behave as if our help is either merely what is due him or but a slight service of love, and to spare him humiliation and maintain his respect for himself. (5)

"A slight service of Love". This phrase should remain in our thoughts when we consider Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*. For now, we may say that love is humiliated in Kant's thought by its association with the feeling of respect associated with the moral law that acts as a limiting principle. In this regard, Kant notes that the love present in benevolence is the greatest in extent because it includes all men but the smallest in degree. "[W]hen I say that I take an interest in this man's well-being only out of my love for all men, the interest I take is as slight as an interest can be. I am only not indifferent with regard to him." (6) Kant construes the duty to love as putting another person under obligation. "I make myself deserving from him." (7) In other words, it is to my credit to love another. Respect, on the other hand, requires that I limit my own self-esteem by the dignity inherent in the other person. (8) If the rich man is not able to practice beneficence in secret he should do it as if he is under obligation by the other's acceptance. He is honored by it and so the duty is merely something he owes the other. (9)

Applied to the love of God the respect (awe) that is due to God limits the love of Him. (10)

Kant goes on to assert that the claim of justice is greater than that of love because it is a limiting principle. May we apply this to the love of men? It seems to be the case that respect for men has a higher value than love for Kant because it is a limiting principle. Kant's treatment of gratitude is indicative of this relation. "Gratitude consists in honoring a person because of a benefit he has rendered us. The feeling connected with this judgment is respect for the benefactor (who puts one under obligation), whereas the benefactor is viewed as only in a relation of love toward the recipient." (11)

The goal of the union of love and respect in Kant's thought is friendship. Friendship is defined by Kant as the "union of two persons through equal mutual love and respect." (12) In the case of friendship, the equality of love and respect insures that the love of the other will not degrade them by a lack of respect. It is significant, however, that Kant considered friendship an idea that is not practically attainable because we cannot know if the disposition to benevolence is equal between myself and another. Nor can I know if the feeling of duty to love in my friend is equal to the feeling of duty to respect persons. (13) I cannot *rationaly* assume it. But the duty associated with respect requires me to act rationally. And so, my love for the others must be limited by my respect for them.

At the same time, friendship is a goal toward which we have a duty to strive. This view of friendship reveals a tension in Kant's depiction of love. For, love of men is necessary to fill a void that would be left in the moral order if respect were the only moral consideration. As Kant asserts, "Love of man is, accordingly, required by itself, in order to present the world as a beautiful moral whole in its full perfection, even if no account is taken of advantages (of happiness)." (14) But then, the moral order must lack wholeness by virtue of our inability to achieve simple friendship, not to speak of justice.

Kant considered moral friendship to be possible, although rare. Moral friendship is defined as, "the complete confidence of two persons in revealing their secret judgments and feelings to each other, as far as such disclosures are consistent with mutual respect." (15) This kind of friendship is not dependent upon feelings that can be inconsistent over time. The friendship provided by a confidant fills a need we have to express our innermost thoughts to someone.

Finally, a friend of man is someone who takes an affective interest in all men with a

view to their equality. Such a friend is able to act as a benefactor of others without placing them in an inferior position because s/he is willing to humble himself. "Taking to heart the duty of being benevolent as a friend of man (a necessary humbling of oneself), serves to guard against the pride that usually comes over those fortunate enough to have the means of beneficence." (16) The significant difference here with respect to someone who merely loves man, a philanthropist, is that the friend of man considers herself as putting herself under obligation in the act of placing others under obligation. However, we should note the "as if" character of this form of friendship. Kant described the friend of man as acting as if all are equal, placing himself under obligation by his act of kindness, "as if he were a father to all".

Kierkegaard—Works of Love

Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* is a late book in his extensive writings. It appeared in 1847, a year after Kierkegaard considered his work as a writer to be complete. (17) R. Gregor Smith notes that Kierkegaard's study of love reaches to the heart of Christian thought. The intensity of Kierkegaard's reflections on Christian love has the effect of releasing love from the constraints of moral law. That is, the leap of faith introduces divine love as a transcendent norm that lies beyond the moral demand to respect others as a limiting principle. Smith describes *Works of Love* as "making the doctrine of love more inward, more personal, but not for that reason less objective, in the sense of being grounded in the primacy of God's love." (18) While the leap of faith makes the moral law more livable, bringing it down to earth by the transcendence of divine love, the same leap of faith frees love from the constraints of respect as a limiting principle, giving rise to a demand of divine love.

The basis of Kierkegaard's reflection in the first part of *Works of Love* is the text of Matthew 22:39, "And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Kierkegaard attempts to describe works of love knowing that they are essentially indescribable. Since divine love cannot be exhausted it cannot, by the same token, be adequately described. Still, Kierkegaard considered it edifying to describe works of love. The works of love are edifying and the act of describing them is itself edifying. It is obvious that *Works of Love* is itself a work of love.

Kierkegaard depicts Christian love as a duty that derives from a divine command to love our neighbor as ourselves. It is only because love of neighbor is a duty, according to Kierkegaard, that we are able to overcome despair. For the duty to love overcomes the selfishness of human love, treating all others equally. "Only when it is a duty to love, only then is love eternally and happily secured against despair." (19)

An interesting comparison between Kierkegaard's treatment of love and that of Kant may be found in the last section of part one of *Works of Love*. Here Kierkegaard describes our duty to be in the debt of love to each other. Kierkegaard begins by noting that we normally want to relieve ourselves of debt. While it is the easiest thing in the world to be in debt, we all find it difficult to dispose of a debt. But love has the peculiar characteristic that the one who loves places himself in debt. Unlike Kant's benefactor who places the other in debt by an act of kindness, Kierkegaard supposes that the one who loves has an infinite debt because they are gripped by love. "One can therefore say that this is the essential characteristic of love: that the lover by giving infinitely comes into--infinite debt. But this is a relationship of infinitude, and love is infinite." (20)

The infinitude of divine love transcends the limits of love we found in Kant's thought, inverting the terms of the relationship in the process. Here, the infinitude of love brings with it the humility of the person who realizes their debt in loving their neighbor

as themselves.

A great act of love involving self-sacrifice would be diminished if the person were to consider their debt to be paid as a result. Kierkegaard notes that it is only in a finite relationship that it is possible to give an accounting of the act. Within the confines of the moral law, love remains a finite relationship that must constantly count the cost of love by reckoning the equality or lack of equality between persons, even in the case of Kant's friend of man who equalizes the obligation. The transcendence of divine love, in Kierkegaard's view, fulfills the law by creating a new relationship based on the infinite.

In terms of Kant's discussion of love we may say that Kierkegaard conceives of Christian love as a sacred duty. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant treats the duty of gratitude as a sacred duty because the obligation to it cannot be completely discharged.

For a moral object is sacred if the obligation with regard to it cannot be discharged completely by any act in keeping with it (so that one who is under obligation always remains under obligation). Any other duty is an *ordinary* duty. But one cannot, by any repayment of a kindness received, *rid* oneself of the obligation for it, since the recipient can never win away from the benefactor his *priority* of merit, namely having been the first in benevolence. (21)

Kant goes on to note that the intensity of the gratitude should be measured by how useful the favor was and how unselfishly it was bestowed on the recipient. Now, Kierkegaard can be said to apply this notion to Christian love by noting that the Christian must **assume** that love is already in the other who is my neighbor. As a result, I am in their debt because of the priority of love in the other. And this assumption itself is an act of love.

The first chapter of part two of *Works of Love* is titled "Love Builds Up". Here Kierkegaard equates love with spiritual upbuilding. Love is the spiritual foundation of the Christian life. It is also the edifice itself. So, the goal of love is love. But the Christian cannot place love in the heart of another person. This power belongs to God alone. At the same time we are commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves. The limitations of the lover are evident in the fact that I cannot produce love in another. So, love is humbling in that the working of love in the heart of a person is the movement of the eternal in them. (22)

The transcendent character of love in Kierkegaard's thought resolves the conflict between love and respect found in Kant's philosophy. Kant's concern was that an act of love places the benefactor in a position of priority so that the one who receives the kindness is in debt. For Kierkegaard, the lover is in the debt of love because s/he has already received the love of God. And this is a debt one should not try to pay off. Love does not give preeminence to the lover because the lover presupposes that love is already present in the other. This gives them the priority, lifting the burden of the task of creating love in them from the lover. Rather than humiliating love in order to protect the dignity of the person, Kierkegaard allows love to humble the person. In the *relationship* of love we find equality among all persons because in love the individual must be willing to give up their own self for the other. In this way, Kierkegaard is able to place love at the center of his thought. Love has a role to play in every human act, whether it be a great act or the smallest gesture.

Notes

(1) Ronald M. Green, *Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt*, State University of New York Press, 1992.

(2) Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman Kemp Smith, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1965, B xxx.

(3) Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, translated by Louis Infield, forward to the torchbook edition by Lewis White Beck, Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., New York, 1963, p. 136.

(5) *Ibid.*, p. 449.

(6) *Ibid.*, p. 451.

(7) *Ibid.*, p. 450.

(8) *Ibid.*, pp. 449-450.

(9) *Ibid.*, p. 453.

(10) *Ibid.*, p. 488.

(11) *Ibid.*, p. 454.

(12) *Ibid.*, p. 469.

(13) *Ibid.*

(14) *Ibid.*, p. 458.

(15) *Ibid.*, p. 471.

(16) *Ibid.*, p. 473.

(17) R. Gregor Smith, preface, *Works of Love*, by Soren Kierkegaard, translated by Howard Hong, preface by R. Gregor Smith, Harper & Row, 1962.

(19) Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, p. 54.

(20) *Ibid.*, p. 172.

(21) Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 455.

(22) Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, p. 206.

