

## Wrenching Open the Lock of Self-Love: Kierkegaard on Narcissism

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The microcosm of early 19<sup>th</sup> century Copenhagen was enough of a human laboratory for Kierkegaard to be able to identify the attitudes and delusions we tend to have about what it means to be a human being. Kierkegaard skillfully pulled off the protective layers of the human psyche to describe and assess it with forceful language and strategic technique. If you read him carefully, it's hard to escape the feeling that he is writing to you from the distance of almost 200 years.

Of all of the many Kierkegaardian themes that reveal his uncanny skill of knowing us, I've chosen to speak about self-love.

It is the theme of our historical moment in the year 2016, abundantly examined in the popular press, enabled and enhanced by current technologies and social networking apps. We routinely diagnose others, like celebrities and politicians, as having too much of it. Excessive self-love, the “toxic self-absorption” called narcissism is “the new American disease.”<sup>2</sup> This disease, or technically this personality disorder, is described in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* as an impairment in personality and interpersonal functioning that is paired with feelings of grandiosity and attention seeking. Before I proceed, it's important to say this: rather than discussing narcissism as a psychological condition that belongs to a few, I wish to discuss it in the way that Kierkegaard did, as a theological concept that applies to all. This is important because some readers of Kierkegaard entangle themselves in

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<sup>1</sup> This lecture memorializes Julia Watkin. Unfortunately for me, I didn't have the opportunity to meet her personally, but I know that she set a tone of generosity and hospitality in the Kierkegaard community and that all those who came into contact with her were glad for it. I'm grateful for her scholarly work and also for her spirit of kindness and embodied works of love that continue to trickle down through the generations of Kierkegaard scholars because of her example. I hope my lecture will honor her memory.

<sup>2</sup> Tolentino, Jia. “What Happens When We Decide Everyone Else is a Narcissist.” *The New Yorker*. Aug. 17, 2016.

questions like “isn't there a right amount of self-love?” and “aren't there some people who would benefit from more self-love?” Although these are interesting and important questions in another context, I think they arise from a misunderstanding of Kierkegaard's theological meaning of self-love.

Let's begin by considering two images: the first from a painting and the second from a Latin phrase.

SLIDE 1: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/69599494@N07/6329375692/>

This painting by the contemporary Scottish artist Jody Kelly recalls the original story of Narcissus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Narcissus receives a foreboding prophecy as a baby, and later, cursed by the goddess Nemesis because he spurned Echo, discovers his image in a clear pool. He falls in love with his own reflection and then dies- or, on some readings, commits suicide. Ovid wrote:

By his own flames consum'd the lover lyes,  
And gives himself the wound by which he dies.  
To the cold water oft he joins his lips,  
Oft catching at the beauteous shade he dips  
His arms, as often from himself he slips...  
Mindless of sleep, and negligent of food;  
still view'd his face, and languish'd as he view'd.

He asks the trees around the pool, “Tell me, if e'er within your shades did lye/ A youth so tortur'd, so perplex'd as I?”<sup>3</sup>

Here is Narcissus joining his lips to the cold water. The blinded and fused double-head of the man and the reflection shuts out all else, even the very air needed to survive.

The second image comes from this phrase introduced by Augustine and developed by

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<sup>3</sup> <http://classics.mit.edu/Ovid/metam.3.third.html>

Luther: *incurvatus in se* or *homo incurvatus in se* which literally means “humanity curved in on itself.” In his *Lectures on Romans*, Luther used this phrase to describe the nature of sin and human moral failure. He contrasted his view with the views of Aristotle and Aquinas who understand humans as having a general or universal understanding of the good, but not always holding a solid grasp on what to do in a particular situation. Conversely, Luther thought we know what the good is in particular, but not in general, because we don't know the good for all- we just know the good for ourself.

It is said that human nature has a general notion of knowing and willing good, but that it goes wrong in particulars. It would be better to say that it knows and wills the good in particular things, but in general neither knows nor wills the good. This is so because it knows only its own good or what is good, honorable, and useful for itself, but not what is good for God and for others. Therefore it knows and wills mainly a good that is a particular good, indeed, that is good only for the individual self. And this is in agreement with the Scripture, which describes man as curved in upon himself to such an extent that he bends not only physical but also spiritual goods toward himself, seeking himself in all things. (218-9)

This is a conception of sin not as simple as disobedience to laws or commands, but rather as sin as a turning away from God and inward onto oneself. It is a conception of sin as closing oneself off from relationship. The systematic theologian Matt Jenson, writes that according to this view, “sin...is not *merely* pride, but the willful re-direction of attention and love from God to the human self apart from God which results in alienation from God and the fracturing of human society” (3). The harm caused by this curving inward is therefore two-fold. One harm is to human society and therefore is highly visible. Think of all of the perversions of our relationships that come from obsessive self-focus: environmental degradation from anthropocentrism; economic disparity from the pursuit of unfettered financial self-interest; all forms of discrimination like sexism, racism, ableism, agism, xenophobia, and so on that comes from the

exclusive orientation “of attention and love...to the self.” It's worth noting that some secular moral theories, like Hobbes's social contract and Ayn Rand's Egoism, take self-interest as a first principle that most accurately describes who we are once we strip away all the rules, institutions and social conditioning that hold this impulse in check. In addition to the first harm caused to society, the second harm caused is to one's own self. This harm is less visible, but as Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus warns in *The Sickness Unto Death* it is no less dangerous. This book catalogues the various forms of despair as ways in which we relate improperly to ourselves and to what has created us. The deepest form of despair comes from a refusal to recognize oneself as created by God and the corresponding insistence on self creation. The Lutheran understanding of this alienation from God is that it ultimately shuts out the possibility of love. The inward curving of the self blinds us from help that could be offered from the outside. Think again of the image of Narcissus that cannot see anything but his own image. Luther goes on to say in his *Lectures on Romans*,

Now this curvedness is natural; it is a natural defect and a natural evil. Hence, man gets no help from the powers of his nature, but he is in need of some more effective help from the outside. And this is love. (219)

Self-love therefore is contrasted with another kind of love, one that moves outward and away from the self. In his book *Agape and Eros*, Anders Nygren defined love as “a relation between a subject who loves and an object that is loved” (211) and went on to explain different forms it can take. He included self-love and stated “we might well have doubts about describing it as a relation, since the loving subject and the loved object coincide.” He went on to write,

Christianity does not recognise self-love as a legitimate form of love. Christian love moves in two directions, towards God and towards its neighbor: and in self-love it finds its chief adversary, which must be fought and conquered. It is self-love that alienates man from God, preventing him from sincerely giving himself up to God, and it is self-love that shuts up a man's heart against his neighbor.

(Nygren 217)

The painting and phrase now give us context for a particular understanding of self-love as both universally part of our nature and destructive of relationships and selves. It is this specifically Lutheran understanding that must serve necessarily as a backdrop for Kierkegaard's discussion of the Christian imperative to love the neighbor in *Works of Love*. In this book, Kierkegaard writes that this imperative demands Christian love (*Kjerlighed*) rather than indirect forms of self-love such as romantic love and friendship.

Since “it is Christianity’s intention to wrest self-love away from us human-beings” (*WOL* 17), the commandment to love the neighbor “as with a pick, wrenches open the lock of self-love and wrests it away from a person” (*WOL* 17). Christianity presupposes the ease and allure of self-love in contrast to the difficulty of extending love to others without a promise of reciprocation or reward. Thus, Christian love is set forth as a *task* whose beneficiary is “the neighbor” who is not the specific lover, friend, enemy, nor stranger, but is representative of all people, regardless of their relation to the self.

Now after this background context, I wish to say something about what I take to be Kierkegaard's three unique contributions on the subject of self-love: 1) He draws our attention to how pervasive it is. He shows that what we normally call love for others - like for our spouse or friend- is usually, in fact, self-love. 2) He shows the strenuousness required of love that actively works to mirror the equality of God's love. This involves pulling ourselves down in status and drawing others up. 3) He emphasizes that proper self-knowledge is required before we can love others properly.

### *I. Self-love's pervasiveness*

Kierkegaard considered all love, with the exception of Christian love, to be forms of preferential love, and therefore also self-love. These forms of love, of which he

specifically mentions erotic love and friendship, are characterized by exclusivity, selectivity, and natural inclination.

...erotic love and friendship are the very peak of self-esteem, the *I* intoxicated in the *other I*. The more securely one *I* and another *I* join to become one *I*, the more this united *I* selfishly cuts itself off from everyone else. At the peak of erotic love and friendship, the two actually do become one self, one *I*. This is explainable only because in preferential love there is a natural determinant (drive, inclination) and self-love, which selfishly can unite the two in a new selfish self. (*WOL* 56)

Preferential love thus focuses attention only on a specific, self-concerned *I*. Kierkegaard termed worldly self-concern “sagacity;” “Acting sagaciously is... whereby one undeniably gets furthest ahead in the world, wins the world’s good and advantages and the world’s honor” (*WOL* 261). Sagacity names the activity of identifying and seeking out one’s own preferences in order to gain advantage. It is therefore counter-productive to the duty of Christian love which disregards, and frequently contradicts, preference.

Acting sagaciously is, actually, a *halfway approach*, whereby one undeniably gets furthest ahead in the world, wins the world’s goods and advantages and the world’s honor, because, in the eternal sense, the world and the world’s advantages are half-measures. But neither the eternal nor Holy Scripture has taught anyone to aspire to get ahead or furthest ahead in the world; on the contrary, it warns against getting too far ahead in the world in order, if possible, to keep oneself unstained by the defilement of the world. But if this is so, then aspiring to get ahead or furthest ahead in the world does not seem commendable. (*WOL* 261)

Kierkegaard’s application of the pietistic terminology of self-denial and humility to Christian love sharply contrasts it with the sagacity of preferential love; “Wherever the essentially Christian is, there also is self-denial, which is Christianity’s essential form” (*WOL* 56) and, “The one who loves humbles himself before the good... the one who loves hides himself” (*WOL* 340). Christian love seeks to shift the focus away from the

specific, self-concerned *I* and thereby make possible the extension of one's concern beyond the self. Expressions of self-denial and humility are ultimately expressions of love for the neighbor since they halt the absorbing and exclusive activity of preferential love. Kierkegaard insisted that in order for one's actions of self-denial and humility to carry ethical weight, those actions cannot be motivated, even in small part, by sagacity; he wrote that the denial is not to be half-hearted, but decisive.<sup>4</sup> He also wrote that this decisiveness is private and cannot be expressed to others.

...self-denial is required *inwardly* and self-sacrificing unselfishness *outwardly*. If, then, someone... is asked whether it is actually out of love on his part that he does it, the answer must be: 'No one else can decide this for certain; it is possible that it is vanity, pride- in short, something bad, but it is also possible that it is love.'  
(*WOL* 374)

## *II. Equality in humility and upbuilding*

Christian love's movement away from the self's preferences is simultaneously an extension of concern toward the neighbor. This new object of concern is, by its very definition, equality: "The neighbor is the one who is equal" (*WOL* 60). Whereas preferential love is determined by people's dissimilarities<sup>5</sup>, Christian love commands equality in love that mirrors humanity's "eternal equality before God" (*WOL* 68). Genuine Christian love equalizes.

*Love for the neighbor is therefore the eternal equality in loving, but the eternal equality is the opposite of preference. This needs no elaborate development. Equality is simply not to make distinctions, and eternal*

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<sup>4</sup> Kierkegaard wrote,

A person makes Christian humility and self-denial empty when he indeed denies himself in one respect but does not have the courage to do it decisively, and therefore he takes care to be understood in his humility and his self-denial; and then he becomes honored and esteemed for his humility and self-denial- which certainly is not self-denial. (*WOL* 374)

<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard wrote,

In erotic love and friendship, the two love each other by virtue of the dissimilarity or by virtue of the similarity that is based on dissimilarity (as when two friends love each other by virtue of similar customs, characters, occupations, education, etc., that is, on the basis of the similarity by which they are different from other people, or in which they are like each other as different from other people. (*WOL* 56)

equality is unconditionally not to make the slightest distinction, unqualifiedly not to make the slightest distinction. Preference, on the other hand, is to make distinctions; passionate preference is unqualifiedly to make distinctions. (*WOL* 58)

One of the ways this equalizing can take place is through our use of language. Equality is not merely something we are to conceptualize, but something to realize through our actions-- and this includes realizing it in the ways in which we speak to each other. We can use language to pull ourselves down and push others up. This is done not only in what we choose to say, but also sometimes more importantly in what we choose to not say. In *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* and *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard gives three specific examples of silence that perform the function of equalizing: 1) silence can diminish the natural activity of comparison, 2) silence can hide the neighbor's sin, and 3) silence can humble the self. Let's look at these examples briefly.

In Part II of *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* titled "What We Learn from the Lilies in the Field and from the Birds of the Air," Kierkegaard began by discussing worry in the lesson to be learned from the lilies and the birds concerning "To Be Contented With Being a Human Being." Kierkegaard illustrated the lesson by means of a parable about a lily, who in comparing itself to a more beautiful and better situated lilies became worried, "preoccupied with itself and the condition of its life- all the day long" (*UDVS* 168). The parable is, of course, allegorical since "the lily is the human being" (*UDVS* 169). The parable's purpose is to show the corruption of comparison and how it induces worry<sup>6</sup> by "putting the human being in someone else's place or putting someone else in his place" (*UDVS* 169). Yet to speak of one's "place" in order to judge its superiority or inferiority in relation to someone else's "place" may be sagacious, it is also antithetical to the work of Christian love. The perceived distinctions between

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6 Kierkegaard wrote,

All *wordly* worry has its basis I in a person's unwillingness to be contented with being a human being, in his worried craving for distinction by way of comparison. (*UDVS* 171)

people created through comparison prevent the necessary equality of Christian love. The lilies and the birds exemplify this equality by living without comparison and worry. The lesson to be learned from the lilies and the birds is succinctly stated in another of Kierkegaard's books that discussed the same topic: "From the lily and the bird as teachers, let us learn *silence*, or learn to *be silent*" (WA 10).

Kierkegaard wrote that comparison unavoidably happens in conversation:

All misapprehension, after all, stems from speech, more specifically from a comparison that is implicit in talking, especially in conversation. For example, when the happy person says to one who is worried: Be glad, the remark also implies: as I am glad; and when the strong person says: Be strong, it is tacitly understood, as I am strong. (UDVS 160-161)

Although silence does not totally remove the possibility of human comparison, which Kierkegaard believed inevitably exists when two people are present to each other<sup>7</sup>, silence does diminish comparison just by halting conversation.

Comparison only ceases altogether in the pure silence that exists when one is alone, or the equivalent, which, according to Kierkegaard, is being in nature or with children.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, choosing to be silent in the presence of someone else can be, in a sense, an attempt to make oneself invisible to the other in order to diminish comparison. Silence produced out of "solicitude" (UDVS 160) and "respect" (UDVS 161) for the other is a form of purposeful concealment of the self. This concealment functions as an equalizer through not mentioning, and thereby deemphasizing, the distinctions between the self

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7 Kierkegaard writes, "No individual can be present, even though in silence, in such a way that his presence means nothing at all by way of comparison." (UDVS 161)

8 Kierkegaard writes that when one is in nature or with children, one is in the silence of aloneness:

...out where the lily blooms so beautifully, in the field, up there where the bird is freely at home, in the heavens, if comfort is being sought- there is unbroken silence; no one is present there, and everything is sheer persuasion. (UDVS 161)

And,

How often has not a sufferer experienced and movingly sensed that when only a child is present there is still no one present. (UDVS 161)

and the neighbor.

Another way in which silence contributes to the equality of the neighbor is by hiding the neighbor's sin.<sup>9</sup> According to Kierkegaard, love does not "discover sins" (*WOL* 282). Rather the one who loves "expresses the apostolic injunction to be a child in evil" (*WOL* 285) and therefore lives in a certain state of innocence, of willful naivety in relation to the existence of other people's sin. However, there are times that the one who loves "cannot avoid seeing or hearing" (*WOL* 289) the sins of others, and in these cases, the one who loves is not to ignore the sins, or to broadcast them to other people, but is to take the sins seriously and hide them.

But this is the way the one who loves conducts himself when he inadvertently, quite accidentally; never because he himself has sought an opportunity for it, becomes aware of a person's sin, his fault, of what he has committed or how he has been carried away by a weakness- the loving one keeps silent about it and hides a multitude of sins. (*WOL* 289)

Just as silence does not totally terminate comparison, silence also is not the most ideal response to the neighbor's sin. Kierkegaard wrote that a "mitigating explanation" (*WOL* 291) subtracts from the sin and that forgiveness removes sin<sup>10</sup>; these two methods of addressing the other's sin are much more effective works of love. Although silence does not subtract from, or remove the neighbor's sin, Kierkegaard nevertheless considered silence an appropriate response to the neighbor's sin because it 1) indicates a proper seriousness in relation to the sin, and 2) it does not increase the sin. Silence combats one's natural "inclination to see his neighbor's faults" and his "even greater one to want

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9 Love's connection to hiding sin has a Scriptural basis; Kierkegaard considered the text of I Peter 4:8: "Above all hold unfailing your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins" (*Oxford Bible*. pp. 1477-8).

10 Kierkegaard writes,

Keeping silent does not actually take away anything from the generally known multitude of sins. The mitigating explanation wrests something away from the multitude by showing that this and that were not sin. Forgiveness removes what cannot be denied to be sin. Thus love strives in every way to hide a multitude of sins; but forgiveness is the most notable way. (*WOL* 294)

to tell them” (*WOL* 290). The alternative to silence, chatter (*snakke*), not only reflects “light-minded[ness]” (*WOL* 289) in relation to the neighbor’s sin, but it also incurs “guilt” (*WOL* 289).

The neighbor’s fault is and ought to be too serious a matter; therefore to chatter inquisitively, frivolously, and enviously about it is a sign of corruption. But the one who by telling the neighbor’s faults helps to corrupt people is of course increasing the multitude of sins. (*WOL* 290)

Silence concerning the neighbor’s sin contributes to the equality of the neighbor. Rather than using the neighbor’s weakness as an object for an “entertaining story” to “momentarily.. obtain an attentive audience” (*WOL* 290), the one who loves regards the neighbor and his sin in all seriousness by remaining silent. Within the second ethics, the imperative to love confers ethical value to a consideration of who will receive benefit from particular statements and actions. When the neighbor does not benefit from a particular statement or action, as in the case of revealing the neighbor’s sin, the imperative to love overrules the first ethics’ demand of complete disclosure. Kierkegaard contends that the power of self-love is so great that it must be counteracted by the surrender of one’s own personal benefit for the benefit of the neighbor; this surrender may entail the humble concealment of the self’s strengths, as well as the merciful concealment of the neighbor’s weaknesses. Silence, as the means of this purposeful concealment, takes benefit away from the self and gives it to the neighbor and thereby diminishes the disparity between the self and the neighbor.

The final way in which silence can help to equalize is by humbling oneself. It would be to our advantage to highlight the weakness of others; it would also be to our advantage to highlight our strengths. To remove this advantage in service of Christian equality, we should purposely conceal our strengths. Therefore, humility and sagacity are differentiated by *what* they hide; humility conceals that which sagacity leaves unhidden,

and sagacity conceals that which humility leaves unhidden. Kierkegaard described the silence of humility in a way that unmistakably distinguishes it from sagacious silence:

In situations where my silence will make me seem worse than I am, I should be silent- for instance, giving alms in secret. Where my silence will make me seem better than I am, then I should speak- confession of sin. The good a man does he should, if possible, keep to himself; the evil he has done he should speak about. (*J&P Vol 4 S-Z 99*)

Take a moment to think of how counter-cultural this last passage really is; how it flies in the face of how we are encouraged to self-promote, particularly on social media. The lack of self-love, in our time most visible in the constant curation of selfies and posts, the number of likes that signify preference and personal identification, is so normal and obvious that it's almost hard to imagine an alternative to this way of being. Our culture encourages us to ask without hesitation: why wouldn't you broadcast something wonderful about yourself? Kierkegaard calls for us to hesitate, however, and check the motivation for our desire to do this.

### *III. Self-knowledge comes before love*

The final point I want to make about Kierkegaard's views on love is that he believed it entails proper self-knowledge. In *Two Ages*, he wrote that “it is very doubtful... that the age will be saved by the idea of sociality, of association” (106) of people with each other, because “[i]n our age the principle of association (which at best can have validity with respect to material interest) is not affirmative but negative; it is an evasion, a dissipation, an illusion” (106). By crowding together under the pretext of coming together, we can hide from the difficulty of genuinely loving the neighbor. This crowding together to hide can be another form of self-love that allows us to avoid the difficulty of coming to grips with who we are and what we are to do. The imperative, “Know Thyself,” posted over the door of the ancient temple at Delphi, requires the

destructive work of Socrates- the revealing and cutting away of falsehoods- before substantial and sturdy construction can begin. What I am begins with a clear sense of what I am not. Socrates was declared the wisest by the oracle and after his own investigation he confirmed the declaration; he discovered that his wisdom consisted in both his ability to distinguish between what he knew and what he did not know and his acknowledgment that what he did know was merely human rather than divine knowledge and therefore didn't amount to much. His wisdom consisted in his profession of ignorance. Socrates's philosophical humility is recapitulated in Kierkegaard's philosophy as religious humility. Kierkegaard imbued this imperative (to 'know thyself') with theological significance, since for him, self -knowledge means acknowledging our selves as other-created, rather than self-created. Only then after this “proper development of individuality...not until then can there be any question of genuinely uniting; otherwise it gets to be a union of people who separately are weak, a union as unbeautiful and depraved as a child-marriage”(TA 106). Christian ethics, then, requires individuals to have the kind of maturity forged through the recognition of the imperfection of our capacity to do anything alone- including our capacity to love.

This is not to say, as some critics of Kierkegaard have done, that Kierkegaard advocated for a rejection of the world in a way that Nietzsche attributes to Christianity, but rather Kierkegaard related Christian ethics to a particular sort of maturity in and with the world that can only be achieved by the “single individual.” In *The Point of View*, Kierkegaard wrote “this matter of the single individual is the most decisive” (POV 114); whereas Kierkegaard argued that his age treats the “single individual” as a “triviality” (POV 114), his entire work is concerned with the maturation, the “upbringing,” of the “single individual.” The essence of this maturation is the shift in emphasis toward outward action and relation.

True self-knowledge is not something one comes to possess as an object of the intellect, but is a commitment of one's whole being; it is not enough to know conceptually or as a series of propositions we hold to be true about ourselves, but rather we have to act on them for them to be true. Paul Holmer described this well:

For while his [SK's] purpose was to explain and to resolve riddles of human life and reason, he chose not to do it in such a way that would increase the store of knowledge. Having diagnosed the evil of his day as a confusion of knowledge with life, he saw all kinds of illustrations. To be aware of the concepts of faith and love is not the same as the ability to use them; to be an expert on 'love' is not the same as being a great lover, and to be an expert on 'faith' is not the same as being faithful. (Holmer 139)

This all brings us back again to the very beginning when we considered Narcissus and Luther's concept of sin as inward curving. These images describe the one without self-knowledge, the one who takes the oneself as everything, as the source and end of everything.

Some recent scholarship on Kierkegaard's views of love, most notably John Lippett's 2015 *Kierkegaard and the Problem of Self-Love*, has wrestled with what it means to love oneself in the right way. Kierkegaard wrote at the beginning of *Works of Love* that there is a perfect correspondence (21) between the commandment “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” and the imperative “You shall love yourself in the right way” (22). He continued by saying,

When the Law's *as yourself* has wrested from you the self-love that Christianity sadly enough must presuppose to be in every human being, then you have actually learned to love yourself. The Law is therefore: You shall love yourself in the same way as you love your neighbor when you love him as yourself. (22-23)

This proper form of self-love is transposed into Christian love that is outwardly rather

than inwardly directed. It's no longer self-love, but just love.

So what does this mean in summary?

The “wrenching open of the lock of self-love” begins with the imperative to love the neighbor, the inevitable failure of our ability to do this in a complete and satisfactory way, the subsequent humiliation of the self that leads to self knowledge, and then the possibility of love that comes from the joint workings of self-denial and grace.

But this isn't a solution or curative measure to self-love yet. Because even the mere description of what is entailed sets the mind off on a whole another series of questions to be answered:

Isn't this path of imperative, failure, humiliation, self-knowledge and self-denial too extreme and hard? Can it even be done? What guarantees grace? What easier routes can be taken? How do I know I'm not self-created? Isn't preferential love better than nothing? Aren't my preferences justified? And so on.

These questions are what Kierkegaard called the “protracted and terrible and involved” battle of self-love “to defend itself” (*WOL* 18). The lock of self-love intends to remain locked. So then, as usual for Kierkegaard, we, his readers, are left with the challenge and a choice. To me, this is what makes Kierkegaard so persistent in relevance and rewarding to read: his work is not addressed to the nameless public, but directed to the single individual- you and me-- the person who is continually in the process of developing and choosing a self. In this process, we must each decide whether the choice is urgent and the challenge worth it. Thank you.

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