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Why Love Alone Endures. On the Eternal Value of True Interpersonal Love and its Triadic Dimension According to Søren Kierkegaard

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In his treatise Works of Love*, published in 1847, Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) provides a detailed interpretation of what is meant by the "abiding of love" according to* 1Cor *13:13. Based on this interpretation, Kierkegaard's understanding of God as the "intermediate determination" in all true interpersonal love will be explained and his evaluation of both self-love as well as love for partners and friends will be reconstructed and assessed. Finally, Kierkegaard's understanding of which love endures for eternity is summarised.*

Keywords: God as Intermediate Determination of True Love, Triadic Character of True Love, Preferential Love, Selflessness/Self-Denial, Christian Charity

1. The natural abiding of divine love and the acquired abiding of human love

In the sixth chapter of his treatise *Works of Love*, published in 1847, the Christian existential philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) provides a detailed interpretation of what, according to the so-called hymn of love in *1Cor* 13, is to be understood by what its author Paul calls the "abiding of love" when he writes in *1Cor* 13:13:

> In a word, there are three things that last for ever: faith, hope, and love; but the greatest of them all is love[1].

Kierkegaard notes the following passage on the Pauline motif of the abiding of love at the beginning of chapter 6 of his work *Works of Love*:

> Whatever the world may take away from you, though it be the most cherished, then whatever may happen to you in life, however you may come to suffer in your striving for the good that you will, if people turn indifferently away from you or against you as enemies, if everyone disowns you or is ashamed to admit what he owed to you, if even your best friend were to deny you – yet if in any of your strivings, in any of your actions, in any of your words you truly have had love as your confidant, take comfort, because love abides[2].

Kierkegaard's speech of consolation and edification for the weary and afflicted, for those unhappy in their earthly life, goes even further than we can pursue here. He explains that it is God's love that abides, that abiding is therefore a characteristic of divine love, an essential characteristic, as we can add, in contrast to human love, which can indeed be in (divine) love, but cannot be (divine) love itself: whereas in the case of human love, the abiding of love expresses an action or an acquired quality, the abiding of divine love denotes a dormant quality[3]. According to Kierkegaard, human love can only remain unchanged if and insofar as true, unchanging

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1 - Bible passages in this article are quoted from: *The New English Bible. The Gospel*, Oxford University Press - Cambridge University Press, Oxford - Cambridge 1970, p. 221.

2 - S. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, edited and translated with introduction and notes by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1995, p. 300.

3 - Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 301-302: «Thus when with regard to human love we say that love abides, it is readily apparent that this is a work or that it is not an inactive characteristic that love has as such, but a characteristic that aquired at every moment, and also, at every moment it is aquired, is an active work. The one who loves abides, he abides in love, preserves himself in love; what he accomplishes by this is that his love for people abides. He becomes the one who loves by abiding in love; by abiding in love his love abides».

love, which is an essential characteristic of God himself, is present and effective in it[4].

2. God as the "intermediate determination" of true love and its triadic character – preferential love and thus self-love as the "intermediate determination" of natural partnership love and of love of friendship

Kierkegaard then takes this difference between the essential or natural abiding of divine love and the always only acquired abiding of human love as an opportunity to clarify a frequent misunderstanding of interpersonal love. For it is generally believed that interpersonal love is a relationship between two, i. e. between two human persons. In truth, however, interpersonal love is a relationship between three persons, namely between the loving human person, the human person loved by the loving person and (the divine) love itself, which is present wherever there is a loving person[5]. In other words, Kierkegaard understands personal love between two human persons not as a binary relation, but as a ternary relation involving the love that is God himself. But how exactly does he conceive of this ternary relationship?

In his collection of speeches *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard has introduced the concept of the intermediate determination in order to be able to specifically characterise and name the medium or mediation in interpersonal relationships as a factor that determines the religious quality of these interpersonal relationships. Accordingly, the in-between or the medium as the mediating connection between two persons should determine the religious quality of their relationship with each other[6]. However, the in-between can only fulfill this determining function if itself possesses a personal being. This is why Kierkegaard, in chapter II B of *Works of Love*,

4 - Cf. *ibid.*, p. 301: «But in this little work [sc. *Works of Love*] we are continually dealing only with the works of love, and therefore not with God's love but with human love. Naturally no human being is love; he is, if he is in love, one who loves. Yet love is everywhere present where there is one who loves».

5 - Cf. *ibid.*: «One would think, and probably most often does, that love between human beings is a relationship between two. This is indeed true, but untrue, inasmuch as this relationship is also among three. First there is the one who loves, next the one or the ones who are the object; but love itself is present as the third».

6 - H. Friemond, *Existenz in Liebe nach Sören Kierkegaard* (Salzburger Studien zur Philosophie, vol. 6), Salzburg - München 1965, p. 104, defines the religious as that sphere in which the prior, graciously bestowed ground of existence is not only unfolded in thought, as in the ethical, but also «is itself once again reflected upon and, in inner appropriation believingly grasped as God» (ibidem). In the following, Friemond attempts to explain the concept of love in *Works of Love* as a human "response" to God's prior love in revelation.

in which he explains the nature of true love of the other, speaks of God as the "intermediate determination" in true love of the other, while in natural love for partners and in natural love of friendship, preferential love and thus self-love represents the intermediate determination between the two persons involved in this love relationship:

> But the Christian commandment commands loving God above all else, and then loving the neighbor. In erotic love and friendship, preferential love is the middle term; in love for the neighbor, God is the middle term[7].

For while partnerships and friendships represent a preferential choice of persons over other persons[8] – with which Kierkegaard is undoubtedly right – in the case of the true love of the other commanded by Christianity – i. e. for Kierkegaard in the case of the completely selfless love of the other – this selfless love and thus God himself is the intermediate determination or the third party between the two sides of this personal love relationship:

> The God-relationship is the mark by which the love for people is recognized as genuine. As soon as a love-relationship does not lead me to God, and as soon as I in the love-relationship do not lead the other to God, then the love, even if it were the highest bliss and delight of affection, even if it were the supreme good of the lover's earthly life, is still not true love. This the world can never get into its head, that God in this way not only becomes the third party in every relationship of love but really becomes the sole object of love, so that it is not the husband who is the wife's beloved, but it is God, and it is the wife who is helped by the husband to love God, and conversely, and so on. The merely human view of love can never go beyond mutuality: the lover is the beloved, and the beloved is the lover. Christianity teaches that such a love has not yet found its true object – God. The love-relationship requires threeness: the lover, the beloved, the love – but the love is God. Therefore, to love another person is to help that person to love God, and to be loved is to be helped[9].

In other words: for Kierkegaard, the true love commanded by Christianity is the completely or radically selfless love which leads the other to God without asking for the other person's love in return. Strictly speaking, according to Kierkegaard, the only legitimate object of true love for another person is therefore God himself. In his dialectical positivism of revelation Kierkegaard erroneously attributes this radically selfless love to God himself. But why is Kierkegaard mistaken in his as-

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7 - S. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, cit., pp. 57-58.

8 - Cf. *ibid.*, p. 52: «Erotic love and friendship are preferential love and the passion of preferential love».

9 - *Ibid.*, pp. 120-121.

sumption that self-denying, completely selfless love belongs to God himself and that it is therefore also the revealed essence of the true love of the other?

3 Is true (Christian and divine) love completely selfless and therefore a complete self-denial (as Kierkegaard assumes)?

Kierkegaard is initially right when he defines God himself as the essence of personal love in the understanding of Christianity, because according to *1John* 4:16, God himself is love. However, Kierkegaard is wrong when he understands this love, which is God himself, as a love that is completely selfless and therefore a complete self-denial[10], because according to the biblical findings, God cannot deny himself:

> If we [i. e. human beings are faithless, he [i. e. God] keeps faith, for he cannot deny himself *(2Tim* 2:13).

But what does this biblically formulated impossibility of God denying himself mean? Let us first ask what it means to deny oneself. We can find the following definition on *Wiktionary*: Self-denial is

> an act or attitude of renouncing the protection of one's own interests in favour of others[11].

In religious terms, this attitude of self-denial has the specific meaning

> to give up leading a life of one's own determination in order to be completely ready for the instructions of a higher being. The basic prerequisite for all this is, of course, that there is a connection with this higher being and that one receives very specific instructions from him[12].

Based on the validity of this definition of self-denial, it should now be clear why God cannot deny himself. For there can be nothing higher or better than God, whom God could and should obey in self-denial, i. e. by voluntarily giving up his self-de-

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10 - Cf. *ibid.*, p. 52: «Christian love is self-denial's love, for which this 'shall' vouches». Cf. *ibid.*, p. 53: «But Christianity, which has made manifest what love is, divides otherwise: self-love and passionate preferential love are essentially the same, but love for the neighbor – that is love».

11 - Cf. Art. *Selbstverleugnung*, in *Wiktionary. Das freie Wörterbuch*. https://de.wiktionary.org/wiki/Selbstverleugnung#:~:text=H%C3%B6rbeispiele%3A-,Selbstverleugnung, der%20eigenen%20Interessen%20zu%20 (entry on 11.05.2024, translated by the author).

12 - This understanding of self-denial is taken from: R. Luther, *Selbstverleugnung*, in *Neutestamentliches Wörterbuch* (09.12.2009). https://www.jesus.ch/information/bibel/neutestamentliches_woerterbuch/146386-selbstverleugnung.html (entry on 11.05.2024).

termination. Christianity, however, believes in the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ, which according to Christian understanding has a kenotic or self-denying character insofar as in the God-man Jesus Christ the Godhead has hidden itself from us human beings and in its assumed human nature has entered into a relationship of self-denial to itself, insofar as the incarnated Son voluntarily gave up his self-determination to the will of his divine Father and subordinated himself to him, e.g. the words of Jesus in the gospel according to *John* 6:38:

> I have come down from heaven, not to do my will, but the will of him who sent me.

According to Christian conviction, God entered into this voluntary, self-denying relationship of obedience of Jesus Christ as the incarnated Son of God to his divine Father in order to give us human beings a model and a standard so that we, in our love for God, should deny ourselves, i. e. renounce our free self-determination, our autonomy, in favour of our theonomy, i. e. our guidance and destination by God and his will. This is why Jesus says to his disciples in the gospel according *Matt* 16:24:

> If any wishes to be a follower of mine, he must leave self behind; he must take up his cross and come with me.

For it is precisely in this, in obedience to the will of the divine Father in following Jesus Christ, in which the happiness and salvation God wants for us lies according to Christian understanding. However, this indirect self-denial of God in the life of the incarnated Son of God only qualifies the relationship of the human nature to the divine nature in the one person of Jesus Christ and therefore does not represent a self-denial of the divine nature in its self-relationship and therefore does not contradict the biblical statement according to *2Tim* 2:13, that God cannot deny himself. For the God of Christianity also loves himself by nature, and according to Christian understanding in a trinitarian way. In the divine Trinity, each divine person always loves himself in his devotion to the other two divine persons, because God's unsurpassable love must necessarily – otherwise it would not be unsurpassable – also be directed towards the unsurpassable, i. e. towards himself. Therefore, in the inner-divine love between the three divine persons, there can be no opposition or contradiction between the love for another divine person and the self-love of each divine person and of all three divine persons for their common divine essence.

4. The true self-love as the measurement of the true love of the other in the understanding of Christianity – against Kierkegaard's pejorisation of self-love, love for partners and love of friendship

But could it perhaps be that human nature in Jesus Christ does not love itself, but only denies itself and only for this reason is the standard and model of the self-denial character and selflessness of the true love of the other according to Kierkegaard? No, because Jesus renewed and confirmed the double commandment of love already established in the Old Testament, namely to love God (with all one's heart, soul and strength) and to love one's neighbour as oneself (cf. *Matt* 22:37-39,; *Deut* 6:5; *Lev* 19:18). In other words, true self-love is, as it were, the measure of true love of the other as understood by Jesus Christ. Kierkegaard's definition of true Christian charity as a completely selfless, self-denying love therefore does not correspond to the biblical and at the same time Jesuan understanding of true charity. True Christian charity is therefore not completely selfless, but always maintains the balance between the self-love or self-perfection of man desired by God and his love for the other, i. e. for everyone else. Kierkegaard is right to assume that Christian love of the other must not include a preferential choice. However, he goes decidedly too far when he attributes to Christian charity a radically selfless, exclusively self-denying character[13]. And Kierkegaard is also not right when, in his exag-

13 - Cf. S. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, cit., p. 55: «To love the neighbor, however, is self-denial's love, and self-denial simply drives out all preferential love just as it drives out all self-love». Cf. *ibid.*, p. 56: «Wherever the essentially Christian is, there is also self-denial, which is Christianity's essential form. In order to relate oneself to the essentially Christian, one must first and foremost become sober; but self-denial is the very transformation by which a person becomes sober in the sense of eternity. On the other hand, wherever the essentially Christian is absent, the intoxication of self-esteem is at its peak, and this peak of intoxication is the admired. But erotic love and friendship are the very peak of self-esteem, the I intoxicated in the other I». In this sense, Theodor W. Adorno also accused Kierkegaard of a refraction of nature or a skipping of the natural dimension of interpersonal love; moreover he criticizes the propagated love as a form of a worldless inwardness that is not directed towards the concrete other, but on the abstract neighbour and therein recognises its inhuman objectlessness; Adorno believes that he can identify a hostility to nature of the commandment to love, culminating in the idea of self-sacrifice and yet falling back into mythology; he also sees a reflex of the reification of social reality in the theory of objectless inwardness. From this last point Adorno states the ambivalent failure of the project of *Works of Love*: Kierkegaard's concept of the abstract neighbour, whom powerless love cannot help, is inadequate, but reflects precisely the state of society (cf. T.W. Adorno, *Kierkegaards Lehre von der Liebe*, in «Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte», 3 (1951), pp. 23-38). K.E. Lögstrup (cf. K.E. Lögstrup, *Auseinandersetzung mit Kierkegaard*, Ch. R. Kaiser, München 1968, pp. 85-107) assumes that Kierkegaard's concept of love is central by the idea of sacrifice and the associated categorical difference of human and Christian love; however, this consequently leads to a dualism, which leads to the misunderstanding and rejection,

gerated positivism of revelation or in his radical aversion to everything natural, he only recognises charity, but not self-love and therefore not the love of friends and partners, as being real or true love. Because there is a sensible, healthy and moderate self-love which is not egotistic or selfish, and genuine or true love for a part-

i. e. the failure of love, as the decisive characteristics of Christian love. In this way Kierkegaard misses, according to him, the decisive statements of Christian theology, namely the creation-theological dimension of bodily-passionate love as a naturally given love and as a natural relationship of responsibility. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, played off the relationship with God against human love, ultimately his concept of neighbourly love is «an ingeniously conceived devised system of protection against the other person getting too close» (*ibid.*, p. 101). Lögstrup protests against Kierkegaard's exaggerations in the name of a philosophical ethics of relationship, but overlooks in his highly one-sided and distorted reading, the proximity of Kierkegaard's text could be to such a programme. The only German-language monograph that deals primarily with *Works of Love* has been written by Barbara Müller, (cf. B. Müller, *Objektlose Nächstenliebe. Kierkegaards Verständnis der Nächstenliebe* in *Der Liebe Tun*, Diss., Marburg 1985). For Müller, the love of neighbour represents an inwardness that has no theological means to overcome the qualitative distance to one's fellow man beings; for as religiosity of the immanence it has no relationship to the historical exterior, in which it encounters a concrete paradoxically contingent counterpart (cf. *ibid.*, p. 224). But according to Müller even the concept of religiosity B does not achieve this historical exteriority but is merely a further development of inwardness. Kierkegaard loses the historical concretion to inwardness, because he had no pneumatic concept of history, no understanding of the Word of God that comes objectively from outside, from which the relationship with God and with it the relationship of love as conformitas is only conceivable (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 254-256). With this result Müller can conclude with Adorno's thesis of the historical end of the love of neighbour in Kierkegaard's thinking and at the same time exclude theology from this thesis: Kierkegaard does indeed miss the love of neighbour, but only because he understood it not theologically but philosophically (cf. *ibid.*, p. 27. H. Deuser (cf. H. Deuser, *Die Taten der Liebe: Kierkegaards wirkliche Ethik*, in *Marburger Jahrbuch Theologie* V, ed. by Wilfried Härle/Rainer Preul, Marburg 1993, pp. 117-132), understands Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* as a "real" ethic, i. e. as an unconditional ethic of duty that also encompasses the concrete situation of action. Deuser shows how Kierkegaard's ethics in *Works of Love* is primarily interested in the category of the "ethical situation" and attempts to interpret the reality of this situation (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 121-122); this ethics is thus ontologically orientated. From this ontological-hermeneutical intention comes Kierkegaard's radical critique of all wordly relations, which only recognises human freedom in the sense of the Lutheran "sub contrario". From this point of view Deuser considers *Works of Love* as an appropriate phenomenological unfolding of the fundamentally religious dimension of the ethical situation (cf. *ibid.*, p. 129); cf. also A. Grøn, *Liebe und Anerkennung*, in «KuD» 40, (1994), pp. 101-114; Id., *Gegenseitigkeit in Der Liebe Tun?*, in *Kierkegaard Revisited: Proceedings from the Conference "Kierkegaard and the Meaning of Meaning it*", ed. by N.J. Cappelørn and J. Stewart (Kierkegaard Studies. Monograph Series vol.1), Berlin/New York 1997, p. 221-237. Grøn interprets Kierkegaard in terms of theory of subjectivity and arrives from here to an impressive and decidedly close to the text perception of the intersubjectivity theme in *Works of Love*. Such intersubjectivity is analysed by Grøn, based on the paradigm of subjectivity, both described structurally and in terms of communication processes. In the first case, it is a question of the structure of reciprocity as a form of a subject's prior reference to another person, in the second case it is the process of mutual recognition between these two subjects. The prior-structural reciprocity is to be distinguished in *Works of Love* from another, negatively valued concept of reciprocity. Grøn develops the concept of recognition by an interpretation of the semantics of seeing, which he considers a central figure of thought in *Works of Love*.

ner or a friend is by no means just passionate self-love, which, according to Kierkegaard, is based on a purely natural or instinctive inclination and affection for a certain person[14] and would therefore spring from a self-centred interest or egoistic self-love on the part of the person making the choice[15].

Why isn't Kierkegaard right with this pejorative characterisation of partnership and friendship love? Because the good partner and the good friend must always also be concerned with the true well-being of the beloved partner or the beloved friend and thus with him or her and not only, as Kierkegaard wrongly assumes, with God.

5. Love of the other as the criterion of the selflessness in true self-love and in true partnership love and love of friendship

Kierkegaard is therefore not right in his pejorisation of true love of friendship and partnership; what he is right about, however, is the fact that true love of the other, which must apply to every needy other and thus in principle to all others, is more similar to the universal and uniform character of true divine love ad extra, i. e. to others, than love of friendship and partnership, because the latter involves a preferential choice and therefore cannot be universal. In his characteristic dialectical exaggeration of this comparison, Kierkegaard expresses this idea as follows:

> Insofar as you love the beloved, you are not like God, because for God there is no preference, […]. Insofar as you love your friend, you are not like God, because for God there is no distinction. But when you love the neighbor, then you are like God[16].

Because the neighbour or the other is every needy person who becomes my neighbour through his or her unconditional equality with me before God, love for the other is the eternal equality in love, which is why God is the intermediate destination in selfless love for the other[17]. For according to Kierkegaard love of the

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14 - Cf. S. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, cit., p. 56: «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».

15 - Cf. *ibid.*, p. 53: «Christianity has misgivings about erotic love and friendship simply because preferential love in passion or passionate preference is actually another form of self-love». *Ibid*, p. 54: «But how can devotion and unlimited giving of oneself be self-love? Indeed, when it is devotion to the other I, the other self». Cf. also note 13.

16 - *Ibid.*, p. 63.

17 - Cf. *ibid.*, p. 60: «The neighbor is every person […]. He is your neighbor on the basis of equality with you before God, but unconditionally every person has this equality and has it unconditionally». Cf. *ibid.*, p. 58:

other is pure spiritual love, in which the loving self is purely spiritually determined, because the other is a purely spiritual destination, while the friend is a soul-spiritual destination and the beloved is a sensual-soul-spiritual destination[18]. However, Kierkegaard at least suspects that a total rejection of partnership and friendship love would not be compatible with the Christian understanding of love. That is why he tries to make love of the other the criterion of the selflessness both in true self-love and in true love of partners and friends. That is why he also says:

> Just as this commandment [sc. the commandment to love one's neighbor] will teach everyone how to love oneself, so it also will teach erotic love and friendship genuine love: in loving yourself preserve love for the neighbor; in erotic love and friendship, preserve love for the neighbor[19].

And a little later he says:

> Love the beloved faithfully and tenderly, but let love for the neighbor be the sanctifying element in your union's covenant with God. Love your friend honestly and devotedly, but let love for the neighbor be what you learn from each other in your friendship's confidential relationship with God![20]

6. Conclusion: Which love is it that endures?

Let's come to the conclusions of our considerations: which love is it that endures? According to Kierkegaard, it is at first and foremost man's selfless love of God[21] and secondly our selfless love of our neighbour, which, as he says, possesses the perfections of eternity[22], which therefore endures in eternity for us. For Kierkegaard, love of God is the intermediate determination, i. e. the enabling reason, of the love of the other and, mediated by the love of the other, also the enabling reason for the selflessness in true love of the partner and friend, which, however, also has an intrinsic value that unfortunately remained hidden from Kierkegaard. Despite all the justified criticism of Kierkegaard's intellectual and verbal

«Love for the neighbor is therefore the eternal equality in loving, but the eternal equality is the opposite of preference».

18 - Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

19 - *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

20 - *Ibid.*, p. 62.

21 - Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 57-58: «Ultimately, love for God is the decisive factor; from this originates love for the neighbor […]. But the Christian love commandment commands loving God above all else, and then loving the neighbor […]. Love God above all else; then you also love the neighbor and in the neighbor every human being. Only by loving God above all else can one love the neighbor in the other human being».

22 - Cf. *ibid.*, p. 65: «Love for the neighbor has, namely, the perfections of eternity».

exaltations and radicalisms, this result of his theory of interpersonal love seems to me to be essentially worthy of approval: that it is ultimately and actually the divine love which is both selfless and at the same time not selfless, that it is divine love alone which in itself and as acquired by us endures for us and that we endure in it for ever and ever, that means in eternity.

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