

Love, suffering and the human nature in Kierkegaard's late works.

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Abstract: This paper aims to explore Kierkegaard's account of human nature through the study of the intricate relationship between love and suffering in Kierkegaard's Upbuilding discourses of 1847. More specifically, focusing mainly on the *Works of Love* and on *The Gospel of Sufferings*, I intend to discern the way in which Kierkegaard delineates the path leading from suffering and despair to redemption and reconciliation, both between God and the human being and between humans. In Kierkegaard's thought love is pivotal in forcefully destroying pseudo-conceptions (idols) of the self, of God and of the human being, whilst setting free a form of inner existence that allows for the living God and the actual other-neighbor to burst on the scene. Faith, suffering, self-denial and sacrifice are therefore all important presuppositions of this miraculous and silent transformation of the self-Kierkegaard describes love as "infinite debt", a definition that might strike the reader as paradoxical. He provides us with an account of love as a debt that nurtures all that is dearest and highest in life, a debt which the person who has experienced true love would never wish to abolish. Love presents itself as a duty that liberates humanity from all deliberation, calculation and retribution, in short from the main features of its hitherto historical existence. Love is the unending 'moment' that leads us in the realm of true religiosity, where human and divine kenosis meet up so as to secretly and silently fulfill ever anew the messianic promise.

Key words: Love, suffering, human nature, Eros, despair, sacrifice, resurrection.

Resumen: El presente artículo tiene como objetivo explorar la explicación de Kierkegaard sobre la naturaleza humana mediante el estudio de la intrincada relación entre el amor y el sufrimiento en sus *Discursos edificantes* de 1847.

De manera más específica, enfocándome principalmente en *Las obras del amor* y en *El evangelio de los sufrimientos*, intento discernir la manera en la que Kierkegaard traza el camino que va del sufrimiento y la desesperación a la redención y reconciliación, tanto entre Dios y el ser humano como entre humanos. En el pensamiento de Kierkegaard el amor es fundamental para destruir contundentemente las pseudo-concepciones (ídolos) del yo, de Dios y del ser humano, al mismo tiempo que libera una forma de existencia interior que permite que aparezcan en escena el Dios vivo y el prójimo real. Por lo tanto, la fe, el sufrimiento, la auto-negación y el sacrificio son presuposiciones importantes de esta transformación milagrosa y silenciosa del yo: Kierkegaard describe el amor como una “deuda infinita”, definición que podría parecer paradójica al lector. Nos proporciona una explicación del amor como una deuda que alimenta todo lo que es más querido y elevado en la vida, una deuda que la persona que ha experimentado el verdadero amor no desearía nunca liquidar. El amor se presenta a sí mismo como un deber que libera a la humanidad de toda deliberación, cálculo y retribución; en suma, de las características principales de la existencia hasta ahora histórica. El amor es el “momento” interminable que nos guía en el terreno de la verdadera religiosidad, donde las kénosis humana y divina se reúnen con el fin de cumplir secreta y silenciosamente siempre de manera diferente la promesa mesiánica.

Palabras clave: amor, sufrimiento, naturaleza humana, Eros, desesperación, sacrificio, resurrección.

Introduction

Reading Kierkegaard is arguably always a challenge and a tremendous risk. His books are a disturbing and painful occasion to “take notice” of false conceptions one has regarding one’s own self, God and other human beings. What I intend to address in this paper—mainly through the reading of Kierkegaard’s *Upbuilding discourses of 1847*—is twofold. In the first section of this paper, I would like to show how important it is for Kierkegaard to depict the incessant struggle of individual human beings to firstly encounter and subsequently demolish the many idols of themselves, of the divine and of the others they almost incessantly create and preserve for certain periods of time. I strongly agree with Westphal that for Kierkegaard human selfhood and identity are not static at all, but rather deeply relational and therefore dynamic, as they are constituted through the incessantly transforming relation of the individual with God, with other human beings and also with one’s own self. God is therefore not “only the middle term between me and my neighbor” but also “the middle term between me and myself” (Westphal, 2008: 87-8).

Consequently, every idolization of the self, of the other and of the divine could

affect radically every aspect of human existence, since a distorted representation of any one of these terms reflects and/or produces equally distorted accounts of the others. Thus, an important step to true inwardness is exactly what I would take the liberty to call “the journey from idolatry to true religiosity”,¹ which presupposes for Kierkegaard suffering, self-denial and following Christ’s steps. Indeed, following Christ presupposes the incessant necrosis of these multi-faceted idols. Only then is the single individual free to attain the spiritual clarity and the strength to witness Christ and to follow him not only in the Cross but even in his descent to Hades. Needless to say that by this descent to Hades I do not refer to an actual descent that occurs beyond this life but to a descent that could happen spiritually (but not merely symbolically) in the life of every human being, i.e. a descent that imitates Christ’s descent to Hades before His Resurrection.

This descent, which is a descent in the abyss of selfhood and simultaneously in the abysmal regions of humanity, is seen as the necessary existential presupposition for the emergence of the redeeming and transforming power of kenotic love. Kenotic love opens up the path leading to ascent and resurrection. This kind of love, which unveils belonging-together and solidarity as an essential and originary characteristic of humanity, offers us a radical account of a dynamic, relational and never objectified² human nature. It is also a direct reply to those thinkers like Levinas and Buber who argue that Kierkegaard focuses only on the God-man relationship ignoring or setting altogether aside alterity as represented by other human beings. On the contrary³ in their act of self-denial, human beings face the possibility of actively consenting to love “universally-humanly” other human beings, to immerse into their drama, share it and willingly accept the burden of their responsibility. Thus, I strongly believe that for Kierkegaard the so-called passivity and activity of human nature are two sides of the same coin. In this respect, although it is rightly said of love that it is a gift from God, love still presupposes at the same time the human beings’ active consent to follow Christ, to choose whole-heartedly and single-mindedly the hard road of suffering and self-emptying. The second section of this paper is but an exploration of these themes.

¹ Kierkegaard quite often differentiates between religiosity that flirts with paganism idolatry and true religiosity. It is quite important to emphasize that for Kierkegaard religion is “not something to be divided up between a series of hermetically sealed compartments, but is a process, something lived.” (Pattison, 2002: 31).

² Here using the term objectification I do not refer to the historical embodiment of Christ but to the reification of the divine and human nature.

³ At this point I agree with Pattison who points to “the inseparability of the human and religious drama” (Pattison, 2002: 189).

Following Christ: From idolatry to religiosity

Kierkegaard begins his Gospel of Sufferings with a dynamic Prayer. There he asks Christ who once walked the earth and “left footprints that we should follow...[and]...still looks down on every pilgrim” to “strengthen the weary, hearten the disheartened, lead back the straying, give solace to the struggling”. Moreover, he urges Christ to let his prototype

“stand very clearly before the eyes of the soul in order to dispel the mists, strengthen in order to keep this alone unaltered before our eyes.”
(Kierkegaard, 1847/1993⁴: 217)

Indeed, Kierkegaard asks Christ to give us the gift to be contemporaneous⁵ with Him in His historical existence by giving us the clarity to have before our spiritual eyes His prototype, namely Him as an actual historical being. Kierkegaard deals with the theme of attaining genuine contemporaneity with the absolute paradox of Christ’s historical existence in many of both his pseudonymous and non-pseudonymous writings. His insistence on this inquiry is not solely inspired by the theological and philosophical disputes regarding the historical existence of Christ that troubles his age; it also reveals his inner struggle and zeal to encounter this *mysterium tremendum et fascinatum*, namely the mystery and incomprehensibility of the absolute paradox of Christ’s incarnation that paradoxically both secures the transcendence of God and opens up the possibility of an indirect⁶ relational revelatory encounter with Him.

Indeed, throughout his whole *oeuvre* it is stated that in this inward pilgrimage the understanding⁷ and all its functions shall be suspended. Being a paradoxical form of direct communication with God, prayer is understood as an incessant struggle of the self with itself and with God. However, one could hardly fail to trace behind the conception of a struggle between human conscious-

⁴ References to Kierkegaard’s works are made in abbreviated form. A list of abbreviations is provided in the end of the paper, before the bibliography.

⁵ For the interrelationship between Kierkegaard’s notion of contemporaneity and his notion of the imitation of Christ see Tsakiri (2006: 148-161) and Sajda (2011: 207).

⁶ At this point I endorse Law’s distinction between God’s direct and indirect revelation. Importantly, in Law’s reading of Kierkegaard direct revelation characterises the aesthetic approach and is inadequate because- among other reasons- it “reduces God to an idol” (Law, 1993: 174-175). On the other hand the indirect- but not less important- revelation of God of which I speak above is of crucial importance for humanity, since it is the very precondition of relating to Him as “the image or pattern” (Pattison, 1999^{2nd}: 176).

⁷ In this context I refer to the faculty of the understanding mainly in the Kantian sense. In this respect, even in Kant’s thought, the categories of the understanding have to be suspended in order to make some room for faith.

ness and God, a struggle against different idols of God incessantly produced by individual and collective imagination.

By these different idols of God I do not refer only to the onto-theological conceptions of a philosophical abstract God that led to Nietzsche's final overt pronouncement of the death of God in the 19th century. Also, and most importantly, I refer to the infinite number of images of God produced in the course of human civilization, as an antidote to human suffering and despair. Arguably, in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* (1872/1956: 19-59) we encounter a depiction of what I characterized above as idols, in the form of the Olympian gods that seem to emerge from a misty abyss and attain a specific shape. The gods of Olympus, are for Nietzsche Apollinian gods that arise as in a dream, have a specific anthropomorphic shape and serve as a veil that covers the underlying abyss, that is Dionysus, who is both a source of destruction and of all creativity. For Nietzsche, the possibility of the fall of the Apollinian gods and the subsequent unconcealment of the Dionysian abyss may be totally destructive for the individual. The revealing of the eternal pain and suffering of the Divine Being, the eternal remembrance of what he sees as one's meaningless suffering, is a source of despair and of madness. Certainly Nietzsche would not subscribe to the idea that there is a state-of-affairs purged from the one-sidedness of one's perspective. However, we could say that in his works one can trace the insight that instituted religion serves as a buffer to the threatening powers of the abyss. In the same breath we could also trace in his writings an insight concerning the divine abyss as the source of both destruction and creativity. Indeed, in his view, the illusory status of our representations would not be seen as detrimental insofar as these representations 'serve' the purposes of what he calls 'life'. In this sense it would be alien to Nietzsche's perspective to call Apollo an idol in the negative sense I have adopted here. Simon Podmore has masterfully sketched the trajectory whereby the domination of idols in the human being's relation with God is closely linked with the formation of the ego. His account convincingly establishes a bond between the waning of the idols and the withering away of the ego. (Podmore, 2011: 25-30).

Building on this account, I would like to suggest that Kierkegaard's prayer with which I started this section could be interpreted as an act of beseeching Christ to grant oneself this mode of being that is free from illusory representations of the divine. In this sense, it would be perilous for the development of the human being to get arrested in the aesthetic affirmation of life or in overman's alleged surmounting of suffering and despair as Nietzsche heroically proclaimed. Indeed, Kierkegaard's imploration can be interpreted as an emphatic response to the understanding of suffering and pain that characterized his era and was given an extreme and dramatic formulation by Nietzsche. It is

as if Kierkegaard warned us that the Dionysian transfiguration of the self that Nietzsche would preach years later as the only alternative to despair is just not a good enough option.

Arguably, for both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard the abyss is a polyvalent term signifying at the same time the unknowable, the infinite distance between the human being and the ground of existence, and a specific quality of this ground of existence itself⁸. It goes without saying that for both thinkers the abyss defies any attempt at rational comprehension, making thus obsolete any attempt at a transcendental deduction of its qualities. In Nietzsche's narrative the imperialistic claims of the intellect are met with revenge on the part of this primal abyss, as indicated in the case of Pentheus who was beheaded by the Maenades (Nietzsche, 1872/1956: 76-82). In Kierkegaard's case as the understanding is continually thwarted by the impenetrability of divine life, the human being gets trapped into the very nexus of its failing attempts, of its various idols. And while for Nietzsche the abyss signifies nothing but the absence of any pre-established meaning, for Kierkegaard the same abyss points to the existence of an unsolvable mystery that takes its ultimate form in the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

Moreover, in Kierkegaard's case, it also points to the abysmal ontological and existential difference between God and human beings, which on a first level seems to condemn human life in the confines of the realm of anxiety and despair. And where for Nietzsche there is nothing more to be sought in life than heroic self-affirmation, Kierkegaard's alternative proposal is at pains to establish the exodus from despair via the following of every step Christ took in his historical existence⁹. This Kierkegaardian version of *imitatio Christi* happens as I've already mentioned above on a spiritual plane that is always accompanied by the joyful acceptance of the actual sufferings the life of every

⁸ As Podmore shows the English term abyss is a translation for both the Danish terms *Dyb* ("empty space or depth") and *Afgrund* (groundless), indicating thus both the horrifying and swallowing dimension of the abyss and its redeeming power. The same author traces the ambiguity of this in many of Kierkegaard's works (i.e. *Concept of Anxiety*, *Philosophical Fragments*, *Book on Adler*, *Christian Discourses*, etc.). Importantly, Kierkegaard's insistence on the abysmal difference separating God and the individual entails the danger of the self being swallowed up by the abyss. (Podmore, 2011: 2-9. This means that the self runs always the risk of entering into an absolute relation both to the divine and to the demonic. (Kierkegaard, 1843a/1983: 88).

⁹ George Pattison convincingly shows that "the second part of Kierkegaard's religious authorship moves away from the religion of hidden inwardness to the active following of Christ and witnessing to Christ in the world." (Pattison, 2002: 215).

¹⁰ Tamara Monet Marks remarks that for Christians "the possibility of eternal happiness is based on the historical events of the incarnation and the resurrection of Christ". (Monet Marks, 2010: 160).

individual human being entails. If this depiction is correct in its basic lines, then it would seem that Kierkegaard calls his readers to follow the example of Christ in plunging themselves to the nether regions of Hades only to emerge victorious through Christ's resurrection¹⁰.

It is in this sense that I would like to suggest that Kierkegaard latently points to a possibility of a radical transfiguration of human existence through prayer which was beautifully formulated almost a century later by a Russian monk, St. Silouan the Athonite, in the maxim "Keep thy mind in Hell¹¹ and despair not." (Sakharov, 2006: 42). In what follows I would like to briefly sketch the steps of this secret ascent through descent. Kierkegaard prefigures this movement in his *Fear and Trembling*, through the figures of Orpheus and Abraham, where it is stated that "only the one who descends into the lower world rescues the beloved... only the one who draws the knife gets Isaac." (Kierkegaard, 1843a/1983: 27)

To follow Christ, means for Kierkegaard "to walk alone along the road that the teacher walked" (Kierkegaard, 1847/1993: 220), that is

"to deny oneself...[and] to walk the same road Christ walked in the lowly form of a servant, indigent, forsaken, mocked, not loving the world and not loved by it." (Kierkegaard, 1847/1993: 223)

It also means that the individuals shall firstly take up their own cross and then carry it (Kierkegaard, 1847/1993: 222), following Christ, irrespective of how heavy their cross may be and of how long the road of suffering may be. Indeed, hardship and suffering are for Kierkegaard the indispensable elements of human transfiguration to the extent that he argues that "it is not the road that is hard but that hardship is the road." (Kierkegaard, 1847/1993: 292). It is the road of a schooling that "educates for eternity" (Kierkegaard, 1847/1993 250); along this road the ego experiences the continuous act of dying of which St. Paul had already spoken (1 Cor 15,31).

In other words through the continuous demise of the ego and the concurrent emergence of the authentic self¹², the human being "continually comes to know only something about [itself]...and about [its]... relationship to God."

¹¹ Please note that in the Greek translation of the maxim the word Hades substitutes for Hell.

¹² Pattison arguably points to the same direction in regard of the annihilation of the ego and the emergence of the authentic self when he states that even the term "upbuilding" is metaphorical. Therefore he argues that in the *Works of Love* "to be built up is to be built down, to take everything back to its foundations and to secure those foundations as the basis for whatever else is to be developed or achieved in life", whilst in the earlier *Upbuilding Discourses* "to be built up was really to be reduced to nothing, to reach the transparency that allows our one sure and certain foundation to come to view" (Pattison, 2002: 211).

(Kierkegaard, 1847/1993: 257) The kenotic act of self denial may happen in a “moment” but this moment shall be repeated incessantly throughout the life of the individual. In Kierkegaard’s words

“...the protracted continuation...is...to carry one’s cross. It must take place daily, once and for all, and there must not be anything, anything at all that the follower would not be willing to give up in self-denial.” (Kierkegaard, 1847/1993: 222)

It is evident therefore that the act of kenotic self-denial acquires a paradoxical form, since it gives another meaning to the notion of the *moment* as the event that paradoxically unites incessant repetition and an act that happens “once and for all”. Accordingly, in spiritual life one has to incessantly cancel out certainty and accept the risk by re-affirming again and again the *moment of rebirth*¹³.

Thus, through this descent to the inner depths of one’s own abyss, through the subtle and incessant clearing of the eyes of the soul, the individual shall encounter more and more clearly the actual sufferings of the Prototype. Indeed, Kierkegaard warns us that this task of self denial is a slow and difficult one (Kierkegaard, 1847/1993: 221). Its difficulty does not only lie in the extreme sufferings that one has to endure, but is mainly due to the most painful crucifixion and finally to the death of the idol-ego with which one has lived one’s life until then. It now becomes apparent that self-denial is the prerequisite of this paradoxical existential journey that may seem burdensome and unbearable to some.

Love, religious Eros and friendship: Human nature reconsidered

In his second discourse of the Gospel of Sufferings, Kierkegaard asks, echoing every other sufferer: “But how can the burden be light if the suffering is heavy?” only to answer this question with the help of a love story:

“When in distress at sea the lover is just about to sink under the weight of his beloved ...the burden is more certainly heavy and yet...so indescribably light. Although they are both in peril of their lives and the other one is the heavy weight, he still wants only one thing, he wants to save his life. Therefore he speaks as if the burden did not exist at all; he calls her his life, and he wants to save his life.” (Kierkegaard, 1847/1993: 234).

Kierkegaard then goes on wondering: “How does this change take place?” In other words, what transforms the lover’s soul in order to completely empty his

¹³ See for example Kierkegaard’s insistence on the interconnection of his notion of repetition with his notion of the moment. For an elaborated discussion see Tsakiri (2006: 127 onwards).

self in front of his beloved, so as to consider her life his own? How was the heavy burden transformed into a light one? This paradoxical form of kenotic love described above is wonderfully encapsulated in St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me." (Gal.2,20).

What is intriguing at this point is why Kierkegaard chose to describe this kind of kenotic love through a love story. Although in his *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard sharply differentiates between erotic love and Christian love, here he employs the story of two lovers so as to point to this radical denial and emptying of the self. One must observe that this kenotic love is not at all synonymous with what we usually name erotic love. Erotic love is for Kierkegaard always preferential (Kierkegaard, 1847a/1995:19 & 52); it is often one-sided and thus unhappy, and involves admiration of the other person that usually presupposes an idealization of the beloved. Moreover, as the burden becomes heavier, erotic love can be transformed into Pharisaic love as Kierkegaard wonderfully explains in the first page of the second discourse of the Gospel of Sufferings. More explicitly put, the Pharisaic attitude involves the laying down of the burdens on the shoulders of the other person so "that the husband demands everything of the wife and the wife demands everything of the husband," (Kierkegaard, 1847/1993: 230) as exemplified in the case of Adam and Eve immediately after they ate the forbidden fruit.

It may be the case, that Kierkegaard uses an erotic example in order to highlight the highest form of erotic love, namely the Eros towards God that many Fathers of the Church such as Dionysius the Aeropagite or Maximus the Confessor to name just a few, have elaborated as synonymous to Love. It is true that ever since the appearance of Nygren's Agape and Eros, it is commonly perceived that Christian Love and Eros should be clearly distinguished as radically different modes of comportment. Nygren even goes as far as to state that Christian "Agape is like a blow in the face to both Jewish legal piety and Hellenistic Eros-piety" (Nygren, 1969: 200). However, although Christ's preaching of Love has undoubtedly brought new elements to the understanding and experiencing of Love, this difference might have been exaggerated. This act of clearly distinguishing between Love and Eros can be seen both within Christian literature and in the juxtaposition of Athens and Jerusalem, for example in Levinas's mistrust of Greek Eros as a state of affairs that objectifies and shows a kind of lack on the part of the lover¹⁴.

Certainly, only analogies could be drawn between this kenotic love towards Christ and what is commonly understood by the term of erotic love. The

transfigured individual struggles to avoid any kind of idealization or idolization so as to have a clearer view of the Prototype before her eyes. Arguably, the only feature of the erotic love that this kind of Eros retains is its preferential character, although in a completely different mode. The beloved in this case is God and not another human being. And this kind of love is absolutely exclusive and it requires the participation of the whole of human existence. Thus, Kierkegaard commenting on the apostolic verse “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind” (Mat 22, 37) writes that a “person should love God unconditionally *in obedience* and love him *in adoration*.” (Kierkegaard, 1847a/1995: 19).

However, it should be noted that this seemingly preferential love towards Christ precludes neither love towards one’s neighbor nor love towards one’s enemies. It is rather the very presupposition of love among human beings. In other words, love between neighbors is not only mediated by every person’s love towards Christ but it is rather made possible by the unification of human nature in the person of Christ¹⁵. This insight is clear in Kierkegaard’s claim that the human race relates to God through the Prototype of the human being, Jesus Christ, who as Kierkegaard writes came not to “lay burdens upon others [but to carry]...the burdens, the heavy burden that all, each one separately, would preferably shove away: the burden of sin.” (Kierkegaard, 1847/1993: 231).

Arguably, Kierkegaard develops a similar insight with regard to friendship. In his *Either/Or II*, Kierkegaard considered friendship as one of the features of the ethical stage that is based on agreement in a positive moral life view (Kierkegaard, 1843/1959: 324). Some years later, in his *Work of Love*, friendship is mainly understood as preferential love, namely as a kind of self-love (Kierkegaard, 1847a/1995: 52 & 428). This assumption was made on the basis that individuals choose their friends with preferential criteria, as an extension of one’s self, “as a reflection” of oneself as it has been described in the relevant literature (Lippit, 2007: 135). In this way the friend is viewed as the Other-I of oneself (Kierkegaard, 1847a/1995: 54). Still, even in his *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard refers to a different kind of friendship that goes beyond self-love and preferential love that is the friendship that Christ showed to Peter. More specifically, Kierkegaard emphasizes that Christ loved Peter as he was and He

¹⁵ Pattison points to the interconnection of the human nature with the person of Christ by arguing that “to speak of God as a ‘pattern’ leads on to speaking of Christ as the image of God restored to a fallen humanity”. (Pattison, 1999^{2nd}: 175).

did not break off this friendship until Peter's transformation. On the contrary, "he preserved the friendship unchanged and in that way helped Peter to become another person." (Kierkegaard, 1847a/1995: 172).

It may seem at first sight that this kind of friendship that I'll take the liberty to call 'religious', is an unattainable task for the single individual. However, we have a wonderful historical example of this kind of friendship in the person of St. John the Baptist, who stood next to Christ as his friend. He did not only reverse the traditional form of friendship *qua* self-love, i.e. the "I- other I" relationship by transforming it to an "I- other You" one. He also took a further step by following the example of Christ's love and his kenotic act of the incarnation. By his humble self-denial, St. John emptied himself completely of any selfish element and thus, by becoming a friend of Christ, he showed us the purely human version of the "You-other You" relationship.

Although Kierkegaard understood very well the uniqueness of St. John's story and declares that this kind of self-denial "is seldom seen in this world" (Kierkegaard, 1843b/1990: 282), he nevertheless extended this kind of friendship that we have called 'religious' so as to embrace relations between human beings (Kierkegaard, 1843b/1990: 281). Importantly, this formulation teaches us that the decrease of the I of the single individual is the prerequisite both for the increase of Christ and also of every other person in relation to the single individual.

In the treatment of both friendship and Eros presented above we observe the redeeming power of Love which radically differentiates Kierkegaard's understanding of love from moralistic interpretations of it. It also shows how love should never be interpreted solely –or even primarily– as a normative principle, a kind of Kantian categorical imperative, lest it should give rise to this kind of Pharisaic self-comportment that ultimately cancels out love by turning it into narcissism. Arguably, it is exactly against this Pharisaic degeneration of Christianity –and the secularized European civilization that sprung from it– that Nietzsche directed the venom of his relentless critique.

Thus, if we agree with Kierkegaard that Jesus Christ taught us how "to love all human beings *universally-humanly*", we would not fail to subscribe to his view that love "is a matter of conscience and thus is not a matter of drives and inclination, or a matter of feeling, or a matter of intellectual calculation." (Kierkegaard, 1847a/1995: 143). Jesus's commandment "Love thy neighbor as thy self" asks of us to widen our hearts so as to embrace the whole of humanity (Kierkegaard, 1847a/1995: 19). It teaches us that the love of our transfigured self- this new way of self-love that Kierkegaard praises- is the very presupposition of love itself (Kierkegaard, 1847a/1995: 22). Indeed, even the concept of neighbor is not meant as an abstract category but refers to this redoubling

of the self that emerges when I and Thou form – and get transformed by- this secret communion of love in Christ.

It would be a grave misunderstanding of this state of affairs if we were to see in this redoubling of the self a mere subjugation of radical alterity to the imperialist claims of self-consciousness as Levinas for example seems to suggest. Rather, this commandment shows the inextricable link between the I and every Thou, the common nature of humanity which never cancels the unique characteristics and life trajectory of every single human being. This belonging together of humanity becomes manifest and active in one's resoluteness to follow Christ first in the abyss of suffering, where the suffering of every other human being attains new significance, being no longer a conceptual acknowledgment but attaining great existential depth. The descent of the soul into Hades, the very burial of one's ego helps one to understand that every single individual is trapped in the same situation as Adam. Although the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ changes radically human nature's potentiality for transformation, this hardly means that this existential transformation happens automatically for every human being. As Kierkegaard demonstrates in Parts I and II of his celebrated work the *Concept of Anxiety* (Kierkegaard, 1844/1980: 25-80), every human being repeats the steps taken by Adam and has to some extent chosen nothingness in distancing themselves from God. Following Christ in his descent to Hades the single individual plunges into nothingness, in yet a new manner. The human being is no longer banned from Eden but is called to shatter with Christ the dominion of death and nothingness.

The love of the neighbor ensuing from one's imitation of Christ drags one from the realm of despair and opens up the gates of love and life. The other is no longer a source of pain and embarrassment, a living image of Hell¹⁶, but is rather transfigured into the neighbor, into an inextricable part of the I-Thou relationship. Therefore, the duty to love is interpreted as the sole remedy to despair, to this experience of the lack of the eternal (Kierkegaard, 1847a/1995: 37). In this sense, for the transfigured human being every other person is primarily a neighbor and only subsequently are the others acknowledged in relation to other more specific characteristics, for example, as friends, spouses, relatives, etc. (Kierkegaard, 1847a/1995: 141). Following Christ's descent to Hades is therefore the prerequisite of the radically new experience of humanity promised by Christ himself; an experience of oneself and of others freed from the sinful abyss that separates human beings and God. As Kierkegaard emphatically writes, "Love hides a multitude of sins, because love pre-

¹⁶ For a thoughtful discussion of Sartre's description of the other people as Hell see Pattison (2002: 106-116).

vents the sin from coming into existence, smothering it at birth” (Kierkegaard, 1847a/1995: 297).

Concluding thoughts

The conciliatory effects of love forged in the anvil of Hades are arguably latent in the maxim of St. Silvanus cited above “Keep thy mind in Hell and despair not”. It has been suggested by his disciple father Sophrony that this maxim should be seen as a new commandment, as yet another manifestation of the divine commandment to love our fellow human beings as ourselves (Zacharou, 2000: 351-368). Thus, when Kierkegaard describes love as “infinite debt”, it is a far cry from what is commonly understood by the term. It is not only a debt to God but also a debt to every other human being and to our own selves. It is not a debt to an idol or idols as Nietzsche would have it¹⁷, but a debt to incessantly unveil our idolatry, to shatter the idols of God and gods, of ourselves and of others. This deep solidarity with all the other human beings that this conception of love as “infinite debt” unveils, is best exemplified in the sacrificial willingness of the human person to follow Christ’s step not only on earth but even in Hades¹⁸, that is to carry the sin, the sufferings and the burden of responsibility on behalf of every fellow human being:

“...out of love for him in whom I believe...I take upon myself the pain of faithful suffering and the burden of responsibility; I patiently bear every judgment of condemnation upon me, even that of my loved ones, until they sometime in eternity will understand me- he will see to that” (Kierkegaard, 1847b/1997: 242-43).

Thus, being *the* gift of God and a gift to God, love is the unwaning light of resurrection, the unending ‘moment’ of divine and human ascent that wrests us from the deathly embracement of Hades and restores us to life. **P**

¹⁷ It is not accidental that a common misinterpretation of Christianity (of which Nietzsche is an exemplary case) revolves around the idea that Christ’s sacrifice inflicted upon humanity an unwanted and impossible to pay eternal debt.

¹⁸ For a more elaborate discussion on Kierkegaard’s account of the single individual’s contemporaneity with all of Christ’s steps in his historical existence, including death and resurrection see Tsakiri (2006: 153-161).

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