

## KIERKEGAARD ON MORAL LOVE

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**Abstract :** Soren A. Kierkegaard, the father of existential philosophy, describes the (moral) attitude of an individual to others in terms of “love”, “practical love” - the love of each for all. In *Works of Love* and also in *Purity of Heart* Kierkegaard is concerned with the ethical frame of mind and reflects on the notion of love. Kierkegaard adds two positive effects to a loving attitude. First, an epistemological effect: 'by ignoring evil it enables the otherwise undetected good in people to be discovered'. Second, a practical effect: 'by being willing to look for, and by offering, extenuating explanation of evil, as well as by being forgiving, it can actually prevent the emergence of evil by removing the occasions for it'. For Kierkegaard, “love”, by virtue of a practice, can be seen as a mechanism of treating and accepting other. Here, love is not duty but “dutiful love”, it has its own separate status. A properly good will, as Kierkegaard opines, is “a universally loving will” and cultivating such a will is a moral project. Such “dutiful love” is not love in obedience to an externally given commandment; we look after our parents not only because it is our duty but simply because we love them, the soldiers can sacrifice their own lives and can take away the lives of their enemies since they love their motherland. Love seems to be duty; it is a universally loving will and cultivating such a will is a moral project. Kierkegaard differs from Kant (who makes a subtle distinction between “pathological love” and “practical love”) although he believes in some universal will. Kant would never accept that cultivating a loving will is a moral project. The question thus arises, is Kierkegaard's moral love a combination of both disposition and duty? It is true that for Kierkegaard there can be no appropriation of the law-giver. He cannot appeal to the “hypostasized notion” of humanity to which individuals are subordinated. The problem with Kierkegaard is how to save moral love as a universally loving will within the existence of the “knight of faith” - the ethically existing subject. In fact, Kierkegaard's notion of moral love must be understood within his own religious-existential position.

**Key-words:** moral attitude, practical love, dutiful love, loving will, loving attitude, pathological love, the ethical, the universal, personal inwardness, authority, universal humanity, duty, categorical imperative, universal law, absoluteness, transcendency, Christianity, God, the law-giver, the ethically existing subject, faith, social morality, anti-intuitionism, subjective truth, paradox of faith, religious-existential position.

In this paper I am solely, concerned with the notion of moral love as understood by the Danish philosopher Soren A. Kierkegaard (1813:1855). In contemporary Western philosophy Kierkegaard's consideration of moral love contributes not only to existential philosophy but also to ethics and philosophy of religion. It is a unique understanding of love, on the one hand, and, an unconventional approach towards religion and morality, on the other hand. Kierkegaard, the father of existential philosophy, who opposed Hegel's religious rationalism, describes three spheres of human existence, each of which corresponds to a different form of life- 'the aesthetic' followed by 'the ethical' and finally 'the religious', in his works *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and *Stages on Life's Way*.

In *Fear and Trembling* which acts as a reminder of the essential importance and true nature of genuine Christian faith, Kierkegaard deals with some important aspects of these spheres of human existence. In *Either/Or*, on the other hand, Kierkegaard closely examines the aesthetic and the ethical sphere. On Kierkegaard's account, in the process of the evolution of the consciousness there tends to be a "progression" from the aesthetic to the ethical and then onwards to the religious stage. For Kierkegaard, the religious stage is the highest stage, and it is also the sinful stage. However, it must be noted here that only in view of Kierkegaard's understanding of religious life we have to understand his notion of moral love.

So far as religious life is concerned, Kierkegaard, on the one hand, rejects the concept of cognitive subject, and, on the other hand, encourages a broader understanding of "the ethical" (or of morality). When Kierkegaard introduces the "teleological suspension of the ethical" in his work *Fear and Trembling* he basically upholds the dignity of the ethically existing subject.<sup>1</sup> He makes a distinction between ethical life and ethical demand. "The ethical" which is teleological suspended is the life of reflection and actually "the ethical life" or "the ethical sphere" –the life of reflection and contemplation. With this teleological suspension of the ethical an individual out of his own faith stands alone before God (or the Eternal). He, then, actually exists ethically; he finds himself in his faith, in his direct relation to the infinite and his consciousness of sin. All problems become passionate problems for him. Thus, to exist ethically is to become a subjective thinker. and to become a subjective thinker is to choose the religious mode of existence, and to deny the ethical sphere, i.e., cognitive reality' To exist ethically is an ethical demand within the religious mode of existence. Kierkegaard does not accept the traditional meaning of the term "Christianity"; in fact, when he is not a "Christian" according to the traditional sense' developed by the traditional institutional religion, he considers himself to be a true Christian. For Kierkegaard, Christianity can only be truly accepted via a "leap to faith" for it is a transcendent religion based upon revelation rather than an immanent religion; no institution is required here. An individual stands alone before God. This is the inwardness of an individual. Realizing the impossibility of fulfilling the ideals of the ethical life the individual adopts a particular way of life in which he is inwardly divorced from the crowd, conscious of his primary responsibility to the Eternal which is an 'either/or' choice. It is the consciousness of sin that makes the infinite qualitatively different from the finite and, at the same time, distinguishes the religious mode of existence from the ethical one. Reason is actually replaced by faith, and, rationality by irrationality or absurdity. The incarnation of an infinite God in the finite form of man is a paradox that transcends all human reason.

For Kierkegaard, as soon as 'the individual would assert himself in his particularity over

against the universal he sins; and only by recognizing this can he again reconcile himself with the universal.<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard has no objection against the universal as such. For him, one should determine his relation to the universal through his relation to the absolute. His relation to the absolute is an ethical relation, chosen by him. Thus, his ethical relation to the absolute is also an absolute relation, recognized by his consciousness of sin. For Kierkegaard, Christianity begins with the doctrine of sin and therefore with the individual.<sup>3</sup>

Kierkegaard's ethically existing subject includes others through practical love. It is a universally loving will and cultivating such a will is a moral project. We must understand that according to Kierkegaard the object of religious faith is such that it demands a practical commitment from us, not speculative assent. It is Kierkegaard who first describes the attitude of an ethically existing subject to others in terms of "love" "practical love" –the love of each for all. In *Works of Love* and also in *Purity of Heart* Kierkegaard is concerned with the ethical frame of mind and reflects on the notion of love. In chapter 5 of *Works of Love* Kierkegaard discusses the effects of "loving attitude" to our neighbour. Love, for him, is not any mental state, nor it is an intellectual love of God; it has a unique practical function, and we adopt it deliberately. Once we adopt this attitude we ignore evil in other persons just as the child does so naturally.<sup>4</sup> In trying to understand evil, as Kierkegaard points out, one actually becomes "blind to the good". However, Kierkegaard adds two positive effects to a loving attitude. First, an epistemological effect: 'by ignoring evil it enables the otherwise undetected good in people to be discovered.'<sup>5</sup> Second, a practical effect: 'by being willing to look for, and by offering, extenuating (*formildende*) explanation of evil, as well as by being forgiving, it can actually<sup>6</sup> prevent the emergence of evil by removing the occasions for it.'<sup>6</sup>

It is true that Kant, in *The Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, has made a subtle distinction between "practical love" and "pathological love". It is also true that both Kierkegaard and Kant (and also other existential thinkers like Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Jaspers and Marcel) consider that freedom is personal as mutual. But, Kierkegaard's notion of "practical love" is not identical with Kant's notion although he apparently shares it with Kant. Kant makes the above distinction by considering practical love" to be "seated in the will -in principles of action" and not to be based on appeal or "tender sympathy" like "pathological love".<sup>7</sup> Unlike Kant, Kierkegaard, in the context of "practical love", never appeals to the principles of action. Kierkegaard insists that love is not any super mundane ideal with which every mundane being must conform; on the contrary, following Kierkegaard, we can say that "love", by virtue of a practice, can be seen as a mechanism of treating and accepting other' Here' love is not duty but

“dutiful love”, it has its own separate status. For Kierkegaard, a properly good will is “a universally loving will” and, as we have seen, cultivating such a will is a moral project. Such “dutiful love” is not love in obedience to an externally given commandment; we look after our parents not only because it is our duty but simply because we love them, the soldiers can sacrifice their own lives and can take away the lives of their enemies since they love their motherland’ Love seems to be both disposition and duty, love is a “lubricant” that smoothes the jagged edges on which evil thrives. we must remember that Kierkegaard is talking about the love of each for all; he insists on “love of one’s neighbour”, although a neighbour can be one’s beloved one. However, as Alastair Hannay points out, “loving attitude”, in Kierkegaard, ‘is itself a form of openness rather than of pettiness’ (Smaalighed); while “openness”, in interpersonal relationships, amounts to ‘an optimistic willingness to accept human diversity as an intrinsic (divine) good’, “pettiness”, on the contrary, “Seeks its own” and “the other’s own”.<sup>8</sup> According to Hannay’s interpretation, through “loving attitude” one’s preconceptions and expectations with regard to others are destroyed and his own peculiarities are allowed to confirm the value of diversity. Genuine love’ unlike natural love, is “a relationship between *individuals* (mediated by God)”.<sup>9</sup> James Collins rightly argues that Kierkegaard actually speaks of our ‘solidarity and kinship with God and with each other in God.’<sup>10</sup> In Kierkegaard, love seems to be closely associated with faith since ‘Only faith is able to overcome the loneliness in principle and to encourage our human attempts to achieve communion with each other’<sup>11</sup> Kierkegaard differs from Kant although he believes in some universal will. Kant would never accept that cultivating a loving will is a moral project’ The question thus arises, is Kierkegaard’s moral love a combination of both disposition and duty? It is true that for Kierkegaard there can be no appropriation of the law-giver. He cannot appeal to the “hypostasized notion” of humanity to which individuals are subordinated. The problem with Kierkegaard is how to save moral love as a universally loving will within the existence of the “knight of faith” -the ethically existing subject like Abraham who sacrifices his beloved son Issac in order to obey God’s command. Abraham faces an “unenviable” choice between obeying God’s command and sacrificing his beloved son. Ultimately, faith becomes the deciding factor’ In fact’ as scholars like Philip L. Quinn explain, Kierkegaard actually ‘confronts the Kantian objection that love, as a feeling, is not subject to the will and so cannot be commanded.’<sup>12</sup> Kierkegaard, unlike Kant, insists that Jesus commands us a “nonpreferential form of love”.

Kierkegaard’s ethically existing subject does not live in traditional social morality. The ethical person, for him, rather lives in religious state of consciousness, outside the realm of traditional ethics. According to Kierkegaard, ‘Worldly wisdom takes love to be a relationship

between man and man', but 'Christianity teaches love is a relationship between man-god-man - that is, that God is the middle term [Mellem-Bestemmelsen].'<sup>13</sup> Following Collins we can argue that Kierkegaard is obliged to propose a "new meaning" of "universal".<sup>14</sup> Universal human nature does not enjoy a separate existence. Collins clearly states:

The universal traits are based upon the essential nature or necessity, which makes us all to be men, and upon the equal, though proportionate, demands made on our freedom. Our duty does not lie in becoming universal. For the universal traits belong to what we already are. The individual is required to make a concrete and unique application of these principles in his own existence,<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the notion of universally loving will or dutiful love is not the love that must be directed to God, or comes from God. The ethical is the universal and, again 'the divine' Fundamentally every duty is duty toward God, but properly one has no duty toward God. Kierkegaard himself states in

**Fear and Trembling:**

Duty becomes duty by being referred to God' but in the duty itself I do not come into relation with God' Thus, it is a duty to love one's neighbour' As such it is referred to God, but in duty I enter into a relation, not with God, but with the neighbour that I love. If I say in this connection that it is my duty to love God, I really only utter a tautology, in so far as "God" here is taken in the altogether abstract sense of "the divine", i.e., the universal, i.e., duty.<sup>16</sup>

Hence, so far as moral love is concerned, Kierkegaard never intends to say that to love other morally is to love God, or that in being morally (truly) loved by another person, it is really God that is loving one and not the other person' Following Hannay we can make some observations in this context" First, for Kierkegaard' if there be any criterion of whether one person's love of another is moral or not then that criterion must be a "divine criterion", and there is no moral yardstick available to human beings. Second, Kierkegaard insists that by substituting God for preference, 'the object of one's love is transposed into the neighbour, and thus potentially everyone';

the message that Kierkegaard wants to convey is that 'If you love God higher than anything, then you also love your neighbour, and in your neighbour everyone.'" It is true that God occupies the middle position, but that does not imply that God stands in for the other person as the target of one's love. God actually represents the latter as an "intrinsically valuable other" to be loved as such and not loved because preferred. The other is loved as a representative of universal humanity. Third, love of God is also "moral love of oneself. In trying to satisfy the absolute requirements of moral love' one is in effect assuming one's own right to demand similar satisfaction. Hannay writes:

In accepting that there is an absolute standard of moral love " 'one is assuming the correctness of a principle on which such a standard is based' namely the intrinsic value of human beings as such' The notion of love of God can therefore be interpreted as an expression of this principle' as a way of symbolizing it.<sup>18</sup>

Here, we must point out that Kierkegaard, like Kant, acknowledges that we do not have any cognition of God. Both support anti-intuitionisms, i.e., objective, true moral principle must be accepted on authority. But, one differs from the other regarding the nature of such authority. For Kant, the authority appears to reason in the form of categorical imperative -*Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.*<sup>19</sup> On Kant's account, the moral law must appear to us as an imperative because we are rational agents with a rational will. An act of subjectivity, for him, is an act of practical reason. Kant insists on "reverence for the law" since law expresses an unconditioned necessity valid for every rational agent: *To act for the sake of duty is to act out of reverence for the law.*<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, for Kierkegaard, unlike Kant, we require an authority since human cognitive resources are insufficient to identify the true moral principles. And, for Kierkegaard, the authority rests directly in God, not in rational will of the rational agent. To have faith in God is actually to consider God as the "law-giver". To consider God as the moral prescriber or law giver is a way of "symbolizing the absoluteness and transcendency" of the principles themselves. On Kierkegaard's account, to believe religiously is not to give assent to doctrines, but to act in a certain way, to orient one's life in a certain way. To believe that God is love is today that love is "an absolute and transcendently given norm". Fourth, Hannay, following Kierkegaard, draws our attention to another aspect of universally loving will or dutiful love in Kierkegaard's consideration of God as love. The law of

God “takes”, or, more precisely, ‘the law makes demands’; but, ‘love gives.’<sup>21</sup> here, love’s giving is not the correlate of law’s taking; it is love’s being obedience to the law.

As it has been stated before, Kierkegaard’s notion of moral love must be understood within his own religious-existential position. For Kierkegaard, to become spiritual means to acquire a depth of personal inwardness. According to Collins, ‘The category of the individual completes Kierkegaard’s earlier investigations concerning moral life and subjective truth.’<sup>22</sup> Moral love is ultimately rooted in one’s faith in God. The paradox of faith is that social morality is subordinate to the individual who has the fundamental duty toward God. The true meaning of moral love lies in this fact that one’s direct personal relation to God determines his compliance with the demands of social morality. The “moral agent” and the “subjective thinker” are the aspects of the existent. Kierkegaard does not deny the significance of ethical laws in society. What he intends to say is that for those who are in the state of religious consciousness, social morality or ethical realm cannot control their existence since they are already engaged with the ultimate source of values and moral laws, i.e., God who transcends human reason.

#### Notes and References

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2. Ibid., p. 65.
3. See Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, translated by W. Lowrie, op. cit., pp.208-218. (of pp. 141-262).
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6. Ibidem.
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8. A.Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, op. cit., p. 261.
9. Ibid., p. 245.
10. J. Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1983, p. 200
11. Ibid., p. 201.  
Martin Buber, in his *I and Thou*, also talks about love in connection with one’s collaboration with

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  13. Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, op. cit., p.270.
  14. Collins. *The Mind of Kierkegaard*. op. cit.. p. 203.
  15. Ibidem.
  16. S. A. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1968, p. 78
  17. Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, op. cit., p.272.
  18. Ibidem.
  19. H.J. Paton (Tr.), *Groundwork of Metaphysic of Morals* of I.Kant, London, Hutchinson and Co. Ltd., 1965, p. 129.
  20. Ibid., p. 63. Paton translates the German expression "*Achtung*" into "reverence" and noi "respect".
  21. Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, op. cit., p. 273.
  22. Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard*, op. cit., p.205.