

The Power of Eros: Love in the Philosophies of Kierkegaard and Plato

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## ***Introduction***

If John Lennon is right, that “all you need is love,” then the scope of love’s power must be immense. It takes a tremendously encompassing definition for love to resolve all existential and personal crises. Yet this ‘powerful’ love is not unheard of in philosophy – Plato’s conception of erotic love seems to offer exactly this broad range of possibilities. Love is a divinely inspired madness that facilitates an individual’s confrontation with his existence and his own mortality. However, not every individual loves in the same way. While the philosopher – the lover of wisdom – is driven to knowledge of the divine, others grapple with their mortality through more worldly means. Love catalyzes all types of existential relationships, be they simple or divine.

If love is so important, what then happens when philosophers attempt to redefine it? In *Works of Love*, Soren Kierkegaard ‘raises’ love from eros to agape. Christian love is commanded by God, and by resigning finitude to God’s law of love, the Christian achieves a spiritual sense of meaning. While Kierkegaard’s erotic lover follows his desires completely, the Christian resigns them completely. He condemns erotic love on the grounds that though the lover lays claim on the “highest” of existential relationships, it is bound to finitude; all erotic love must end. Christian love, however, achieves the eternal through God’s command.

This paper first presents the consequences of Kierkegaard’s conception of Christian love in the context of *Fear and Trembling*. Faith allows an individual to maintain his finite desires while relating to the absolute, whereas reason dictates that he must resign them to gain a sense of meaning. Christian love is a form of this infinite resignation, governed by reason. The analysis then turns to Kierkegaard’s condemnation of eros, asking does Plato’s erotic lover fall victim to the same poetic misunderstanding that beleaguers Kierkegaard’s lover? Plato’s philosopher-lover, driven to self-knowledge, achieves a knowledge of the divine and existentially reorients his life according to “true” virtue. This personal transformation sets Plato’s eros apart from

Kierkegaard's trapped erotic lover. Because reason defines the bounds of Kierkegaard's erotic love, the madness of Plato's erotic love defies Kierkegaard's analysis. In limiting the power of erotic love, Kierkegaard recasts higher existential experiences in Christian terms, rearticulating Plato's philosopher-lover as the knight of faith.

### ***Dethroning Eros***

In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard presents a stark either/or: "shall erotic love and friendship be the highest love, or shall this love be dethroned?"<sup>1</sup> Preferential love is a passion, and as such can only be understood as having one maxim completely devoted to its object; it is all or nothing. Any third option, any attempt at compromise, merely dilutes the passion into confusion. By contrast, Christian love is based on eternity, which Kierkegaard claims can never be dissipated into particularity or preference. The Christian, by definition, is to love God and the neighbor – eros and philia have no place in the New Testament. Defined this way, preferential love and Christianity are completely irreconcilable. Kierkegaard rejects defenses of Christianity that attempt to incorporate any preferential love; the thought that both Christianity and erotic love can inform the direction of one's life is mere confusion.

The poet/Christian foil embodies this either/or. As the poet sings praises of erotic love, the Christian loves God and the neighbor according to God's laws. Though Kierkegaard respects that a single person may grow disenchanted with Christianity or eros, he claims this confused individual could neither be called a Christian nor a poet. Rather, each foil is defined through his task. Just as preferential and Christian loves must form an either/or, so to must the poet and the Christian.

The poet is inseparably bound to particularity. His perspective on the world is defined by the maxim of erotic love: "there is but one and only one beloved in the whole world, and this one

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<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 45.

and only one time of erotic love is love, is everything; the second time is nothing.”<sup>2</sup> This maxim establishes the either/or of passion – either this one time, this one place, this one person is love, or it is not. Friendship and erotic love understood through the either/or become completely preferential and completely temporal.

The poet is the “priest” of eros, and it is his task is to immortalize erotic love through his art.<sup>3</sup> He presides over the lovers swearing “*by their love* to love each other forever.”<sup>4</sup> The lovers, seeing love confined to their spontaneous instant, wish to bind their love to something more secure. So, they swear by the only thing they know – the love itself. Yet, temporality dictates that love must be secured moment by moment; the poet and the lovers grasp for security in perpetuity. As long as the love lasts, they will have what they what they consider the “highest.”

Yet this grasp at eternity through perpetuity constitutes what Kierkegaard calls the “poetic misunderstanding.”<sup>5</sup> Though erotic love may be beautiful in striving for eternity, this task is impossible. The poet and the lovers fail to see that “it is the love itself that gives the luster by which it swears.”<sup>6</sup> The entire claim the lovers have on their “highest” depends on the love itself; erotic love only guarantees its patrons the “highest” so long as it lasts. Unfortunately, this perpetual love, bound to time, cannot grant eternity. For Kierkegaard, swearing “forever” is only a futile temporal hope for “all of time,” while the eternal exists in a realm beyond time and beyond particularity. Though spontaneous love exists now, it can never become “contemporary with the future.”<sup>7</sup> Completely enthralled in eros, the poet and the erotic lovers fail to see the sad, beautiful story of their lives: “that it must blossom – and, alas, must perish.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 31. Italics original.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 8.

The poet comes to embody these characteristics erotic love himself. In his commitment to his task, he fails to see that he is himself the “riddle” he propagates to others. Just as erotic love is based on good fortune and has no moral task, his “art” pertains to the accident of talent.”<sup>9</sup> While the Christian “works” to maintain his love, and invites all others to do so, the poet’s ability to produce art is a matter of luck. The poet accrues admirers and attempts to eternalize love in his art. Yet he fails to see that more people and a longer time are not eternity. Filled with passion, he cannot understand any other way.

The erotic error is this: the lover believes he can achieve eternity through preference. However, Kierkegaard places the eternal and the universal in the same realm of experience. By attempting to accomplish one without the other, the erotic lover become consumed by the “lovable misunderstanding” of erotic love.<sup>10</sup> By holding on to his preference, there is no “work,” no negation of desire that the Christian must endure.

By contrast, the Christian’s commanded love is “eternally secured” in the sense it can never change – the command will always remain. Unlike the spontaneous, the eternal is “contemporary with every age.”<sup>11</sup> The command makes love eternal by completely eschewing particularity and temporality. By following the laws of Christianity, the Christian loves everyone at all times. This means that the preferential notions of loving one person at one time or some people at some times are completely removed. Relying on God’s command, the Christian’s love is secured by God’s unchanging law. The “shall” from God makes love a liberating duty that is completely free from inclination. Though preferential love unreciprocated may foster hate or jealousy, commanded love is only capable of loving. No matter the spontaneous impulse, the Christian *shall* love.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 359.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 32.

One might object that change, preference, and particularity are inseparably tied to the experience of loving. These are conditions of finitude and it is better that love remain a finite impulse. Yet Kierkegaard does not seem to be arguing against erotic love's existence, now or for the future. Rather, the problem lies in erotic love's claim on eternity. In particular, Kierkegaard objects to the reconciliation of erotic and agapic love and the adoration of the erotic poet in the context of Christianity. These practices are by definition pagan, not Christian. Kierkegaard's either/or places universality and eternity together in the Christian realm, and our access is through Christ. As is clear in Kierkegaard's analysis of faith, universality is granted through Christianity.

### ***Faith and Reason***

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard criticizes the modern conception of the individual relationship with the universal. Writing under the pseudonym Johannes *de silentio*, Kierkegaard concerns himself with the existential "fear and trembling" of faith over reason-based philosophy. For *de silentio*, faith is a personal endeavor, "a task for a whole lifetime," that cannot be understood through the removed reason of the Hegelian System.<sup>12</sup> His retelling of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac highlightings the internal anguish of Abraham's faith over the simple events. *De silentio* describes that his fascination with the story, his yearning to see Abraham through his trial, comes not from a desire to imagine the events in their context, but rather "the shudder of thought."<sup>13</sup>

This "shudder" results from an inability of thought to explain the existential anguish of Abraham's faith. From an ethical standpoint, Abraham was nothing more than a murderer; from a religious perspective, Abraham's sacrifice was glorious, and deserving of our reverence. How

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<sup>12</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

are we supposed to reconcile this contradiction? Kierkegaard claims the attempt at reconciliation itself defines the limits of thought and our ability to understand Abraham. He writes that “in this contradiction lies the very anguish that can indeed make one sleepless; and yet without that anguish Abraham is not the one he is.”<sup>14</sup> The story of Abraham repulses yet enthralls him because thought cannot grasp Abraham’s experience; only faith can “explain” Abraham. Though it may try, “[Hegelian] philosophy cannot and should not give ... an account of faith.”<sup>15</sup>

In Kierkegaard’s interpretation of Hegel’s system, reason allows the world to be understood in terms of a dialectic between the particular and the universal. The particular, outward world obeys “the law of indifference” and “the law of imperfection.”<sup>16</sup> When we understand the world as particular individuals, we see a world in which injustice and inequality reign. In contrast, the world of the spirit, universality, and ethics encompasses all under a “divine eternal order.”<sup>17</sup> The ethical principles we know to be true, once understood, force the particular, imperfect world into its mold. Within this system, “the individual’s ethical task is always to express himself [in the universal], to abrogate his particularity so as to become the universal.”<sup>18</sup> One enters into a state of temptation when, once obeying the universal, the individual has the urge to again express himself in terms of the particular.

For Kierkegaard, the champions of this system are the knights of infinite resignation and the tragic heroes. While the rest of humanity struggles with the anxious confusion of the particular-universal dialectic, the knights and tragic heroes know their place. Just as a knight of antiquity might resign himself to the service of noble lady, these courageous individuals sacrifice their particularity to align themselves with the ethical universe. And their glory comes with a

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 62.



price; it is exactly through the pain of losing the particularity that infinite resignation “reconciles one to existence.”<sup>19</sup> Infinite resignation thus constitutes a sore comfort. It is painful in the sense that the knight must deal with tremendous personal loss – the type of loss that makes the tragic hero tragic. Yet this pain has meaning. In the context of the universal, the knight of infinite resignation is able to justify his existence.

Kierkegaard gives an example of a youth in love with a beautiful princess but with no hope of realizing his desire. Here, the particular world has made his love impossible. Good advice from the particular perspective would be to find another bride. The youth might become depressed or take to drinking, but ultimately he would come through, find another love, and live happily with her into the future. But Kierkegaard’s youth is not willing to forsake his love so easily. Instead of wallowing like the erotic lover, the youth resigns his preferential desire to the infinite, and “expresses it spiritually by renouncing it.”<sup>20</sup> Though he remembers his love with pain, he has reconciled with the eternal, and no longer pays attention to the finite. Thus, he partakes in the eternal by eschewing everything temporal. All his passion is now concentrated in the spirit world. Through the princess may marry, or even resign herself as well, his resignation will never stop.

Though we are certainly not all knights or heroes, infinite resignation is something all humans can cognitively understand. The infinite represents the outer limit of our reason; though not all human acquiesce, all humans see the imperative. We can think through what it means to have a particular desire and surrender it to a greater principle. Sophocles and Shakespeare make sense to us because we can philosophically explain this process. In the tragedy, we recognize,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 49.

identify with, and even feel pain of the hero, but then rejoice with him, beholding the beauty of his place in infinity.

Agamemnon is a tragic hero who must sacrifice his oldest daughter, Iphigenia, for the sake of Greece. Kierkegaard interprets that for Agamemnon to really be a tragic hero, he must express the universal by fully disclosing his intentions to Iphigenia himself. Though the aesthetic, particular imperative calls him to remain silent, to avoid the argument of others, the tragic hero courageously opens himself to argument. His courage then does not allow him to sway, even in the painful presence of Iphigenia's tears. Once his pain is public, Agamemnon's resignation takes a form that all can understand. We call *Iphigenia at Aulis* a "tragedy" because we can identify, feel, and understand the infinite resignation of the tragic hero. We can understand the pain Agamemnon feels as his daughter begs for her life at his feet. At the same time, we can understand the impersonal, necessary, and ethical forces that make such a painful demand of the hero. In the end, his suffering has purpose.

However, Kierkegaard argues that our understanding of tragic stories like Agamemnon's do not and cannot account for all experience of being. Reason has limits. Abraham too must sacrifice his child, but his story resists this ease of interpretation. For Kierkegaard, Abraham's greatness comes from his opposition to that same universal ethical imperative that would define the greatness of the tragic hero. Abraham is a knight of faith, who instead of subordinating his particularity to the universal ethical, places his particularity "in absolute relation to the absolute."<sup>21</sup>

The knight of faith goes through the pain of infinite resignation, recognizing his ethical duty, but then goes on past reason through faith. On the "strength of the absurd," the knight of faith commits himself to a paradox: he sees particular impossibility, then the possibility through

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 64.

resignation of the particular to the infinite, then proceeds on to make the particular possible through the absolute. Though it would appear that the knight disregards the ethical, that Abraham will murder his son, he in fact suspends the ethical and reconciles with the absolute.

In the case of the young lover, the knight of infinite resignation surrenders his desire to the infinite, maintaining the painful memory of the loss, and gains existential meaning in his new spiritual focus. The knight of faith passes this point and goes on to claim that “I nevertheless believe that I shall get [the princess], namely on the strength of the absurd, on the strength of the fact that for God all things are possible.”<sup>22</sup> While Agamemnon accepts the horrible tragedy of killing his child, Abraham believes he will have his son despite the immanence of his sacrifice.

Since this action is based on an absurd paradox, Kierkegaard sees it as impervious to thought. Thus, the knight of faith is completely alone. Even the act of speaking means that Abraham must translate his explanation into the universal – the universal above which his faith operates. Unlike the tragic Agamemnon, Abraham remains silent in accord with the particular, aesthetic imperative. However, his silence is of a different nature; Abraham *cannot* speak. No other knight, no other human, can understand Abraham’s journey because it is a completely personal one that takes place between his particularity and God’s absolute.

In this way, mediation of the State or Church, which embody the universal, becomes obsolete. The tragic hero mediates the conflict between the particular and the universal through the universal – the young lover submits his desire to the world of Spirit; Agamemnon forfeits the love of his daughter for the state. Abraham’s position “cannot be mediated, for all mediation occurs precisely by virtue of the universal; [his faith] is and remains in all eternity a paradox,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 52.

inaccessible to thought.”<sup>23</sup> Abraham is a murderer and a hero simultaneously, and only he, in his relationship to God, is able to reconcile the two interpretations.

### ***Love and the Christian Universal***

Faith shows the limit of reason. *De silentio* sarcastically remarks in *Fear and Trembling* that “to go beyond Hegel, that is a miracle.”<sup>24</sup> But perhaps this is meant literally as well – going “beyond” is precisely what Kierkegaard aims to do with the faith, and it is a “miracle” in the sense reason cannot explain it. Kierkegaard’s work “hasn’t the slightest to do with the [Hegelian] System” in that it sees reason as a limited in its ability to describe the knight of faith.<sup>25</sup>

While infinite resignation may be difficult, faith is an even more rare passion, inaccessible to almost everyone. *De silentio* describes that to this point in his life, he had still never found such an individual though he had searched for years in vain.<sup>26</sup> Yet this does not mean the whole world is without God. Though Kierkegaard criticizes the pedestaling of reason, he does not bemoan its usefulness. Reason is the tool that the rest of humanity has to relate to existence. Love, commanded in the New Testament, offers an alternative relationship to God through reason such that it is accessible to the knight of infinite resignation. As Law, love is a tool of resignation through which any Christian can realize the universal. As the “universal” religion, Christianity offers this relationship to everyone.

Christian love takes the shape of infinite resignation. Just as the love struck youth painfully resigns his love of the princess for eternal security, the Christian orients his passion to God and gains the universal. God becomes the “middle term,” like the State or Church, mediating the individual’s sacrifice of his particularity. Kierkegaard urges: “Love God above all

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>24</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 34.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 42

else; then you also have the neighbor and in the neighbor every human being.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, loving God, through scripture, becomes the infinite to which the individual can resign.

The universality secured through love – equality – is embedded in the concept of the neighbor. By commanding that the neighbor should be loved “as yourself,” Christianity denies the Christian self-love. No matter how high an individual may hold himself, obeying the command universalizes self-love in the neighbor. Preferential love and friendship are merely selfish manifestations of the particular’s selectiveness. Loving the neighbor in the context of the command overcomes self-love; it is “self-denial’s love.”<sup>28</sup> This is because the neighbor is not just an arbitrary individual; the neighbor is *all people*, and the Christian loves all people equally without any qualification. Thus the neighbor embodies a universality created by God’s law: “to love the neighbor is equality.”<sup>29</sup>

As Christian love takes on the form of infinite resignation, it reason becomes the *modus operandi* of Christianity. Agamemnon must fully disclose his pain such that it can be understood by all. This complete abrogation of the individual’s finitude represents the furthest extent of reason. There is no act of faith, no border where understanding cannot penetrate. When the Christian resigns his finitude to God’s law, when he denies his preferential self-love for the sake of universal equality, he too operates on the premise of reason. Kierkegaard, in his criticism of the Church, makes it abundantly clear that to be Christian does not require faith, only surrender. Reason mandates that finitude and infinity are irreconcilable. In doing so, it allows humanity to gain existential purpose by resigning that finitude and participating in the infinite.

However, Kierkegaard does distinguish his Christianity from his understanding of Hegel’s System. While in Christianity reason reaches its full realization in the universal, reason

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 60.

itself is not the source of the universal. Kierkegaard writes that “without the law, freedom does not exist at all, and it is law that gives freedom.”<sup>30</sup> By saying that that law precedes freedom, that the command precedes the universal principle, he delineates an important conceptual reordering from his reading of the Hegelian system. Traditionally, the universal principle, like freedom, would exist a priori and our imperfection would necessitate law to constrain that freedom. Reason would be the authority upon which the universal would rest.

In Kierkegaard’s Christianity, however, particularity and universality exist in relation to each other. To claim that particularity is a perversion of the universal or that the universal precedes the particular is incorrect. Rather, God’s law, which comes from outside the system, initiates the relationship between particularity and universality. Kierkegaard writes that the law makes distinctions and “it is precisely the law that makes us equal before the law.”<sup>31</sup> Without law, neither equality (the universal) nor distinction (the particular) would exist. In “Love’s Hidden Life,” Kierkegaard argues that scripture is written *to* the individual; it is the God’s command to the individual person.<sup>32</sup> When the individual engages with and follows scripture, its law becomes and creates our universal principles. Kierkegaard laments that the Christian establishment and modern philosophy have lost sight of this relationship, and claim that reason can inform universality.

This conceptual process inspires *de silentio*’s conviction that “God is love.”<sup>33</sup> Though the faithful enjoy a personal relationship with God, he can still achieve some satisfaction through his infinite resignation. While the faithful individual has the joy of God’s presence in the minutia of his life, *de silentio* can “gaze only upon [his] love and keep its virginal flame pure and clear.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 38-39.

<sup>31</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 38-39.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>33</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 36.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

All his focus is on fulfilling his command to love. As the “middle term” between the particular and the universal, passion for God becomes the passion for all. When God is love, even those without the courage of faith have access to Him.

One might think Kierkegaard is proposing a political revolution here. After all, universal equality seems radical. However, commanded love operates in a different realm from the political. The intensely personal nature of the experience of God’s love emerges from the conceptual order of the existential framework. The absolute commands the particular, and through this relationship creates the universal. The universals offered to the Christian result from his personal experience of the absolute – in loving God he loves the neighbor. In contrast, the modern political project seeks universal freedom and equality in the universal itself. Even asking the question, “what about everyone else?” reorders the concepts such that the universal precedes the particular. Love of the neighbor cannot imply some material redistribution. Even if all were equal in wealth, the very existence of wealth would constitute a distinction.<sup>35</sup> The inequality that drives modern thinkers to seek equality in has no bearing in the Christian spiritual world. Love of the neighbor is a spiritual love, and the equality achieved is a spiritual equality.

So what does the dethroning of eros mean in this context? All the particular passions, invested in individual people and moments, are directed toward a resignation to God’s law. The Christian *must* be a knight of infinite resignation. The either/or dictates that all particular inclination be eschewed; either erotic love and friendship are the highest forms of love, or they dethroned. By resigning to God’s law of love, the Christian gains secure access to eternal that erotic lover grasps at in vain.

The either/or is reason’s analysis of love. Since reason is the *modus operandi* of Christianity, a Christian analysis means a reasoned one. While faith allows an individual to make

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 88.

the universal relative, it is reason that makes the universal apply to all. Therefore, reason isolates Christianity in to the spirit world of eternity and universality and isolates eros in temporality and particularity. For Kierkegaard, The erotic lover is not mad – he is just wrong.

The result of this philosophy is that three distinct relationships with existence emerge. The poet and the erotic lovers are caught in the “poetic misunderstanding,” thinking that they achieve a relationship to the divine when they are really fooled by their own passions. The Christian knight of infinite resignation uses God’s law of love to sacrifice his particularity, all his inclination, and to achieve Christian universality. The rare knight of faith surpasses the security of the eternal and enters into a personal relationship with God marked by “fear and trembling.” This knight truly believes that with God all things are possible, including his own particularity.

### ***Plato’s Eros***

As *Works of Love* makes clear, this philosophy mandates that preferential love be dethroned. Does Plato’s conception of eros, driven to beauty, reify this description? This is a tempting analysis. Perhaps eternity and particularity *are* irreconcilable, making erotic love yearn for an experience it cannot realize.

As Kierkegaard’s poet lays claim on the “hightest” through erotic love and friendship, Plato’s lover too yearns for the divine. Plato’s erotic love is clearly more than a crass and bodily indulgence; love allows the lover to connect with the divine. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates describes love as productive madness in which a lover is reminded of heavenly beauty through the presence of earthly beauty.

Socrates relates this relationship between the human soul and the cosmos allegorically. The soul is like the union of a winged chariot team. In heaven, Zeus leads a procession of the gods to up to the top, at which point the immortal souls bask in heaven’s brilliant exterior. This



world beyond heaven is indescribable, a place “without color and without shape and without solidity, a being that really is what it is.”<sup>36</sup> From this vantage point, the forms of Justice, Self-Control, Knowledge, and Beauty nourish the gods and the immortal souls, providing enough sustenance to their wings to remain in flight beyond the physical world.

While the gods steer orderly chariots, the driver of the soul’s chariot is in charge of two winged horses, one good and the other disobedient. Though some are skilled enough to follow directly behind a god and glimpse true reality, many others are caught in a violent mad rush below, obscuring or completely blocking their vision. These unfortunate souls, stripped of their wings, descend into different living organisms.

Love emerges from this relationship between the human soul and the cosmos. When the lover sees the beauty of the beloved, he appears mad because “he stands outside human concerns and draws close to the divine.”<sup>37</sup> He is not simply crazy, but rather “he sees the beauty we have down here and is reminded of true beauty.”<sup>38</sup> As humans, our souls are stripped of their wings. This experience of beholding beauty “warms [the lover] and melts the places where the wings once grew,” nourishing them through the recollection of true beauty and true reality.<sup>39</sup>

Love then becomes more than a simple relationship between two people; love allows the mortal lover to partake in the immortal realm of the gods. Even love’s ancestry ties it both to the material and the immortal worlds. Love is “by nature neither immortal nor mortal.”<sup>40</sup> He is the bastard son of Poros, the god of resource, and Penia, the god of poverty, conceived on Aphrodite’s birthday and destined to follow her beauty. Love, as a desire, must constitute a lack.

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<sup>36</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 247C.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 249D.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 251B.

<sup>40</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 203E.

It is neither wisdom nor ignorance, for love is not content with ignorance, and still desires more knowledge: it is a lover of wisdom.

In the *Symposium*, Diotima explains to Socrates that we love because “mortal nature seeks so far as possible to live forever and be immortal.”<sup>41</sup> While immortals preserve themselves by staying the same, mortals can only remain by constantly regenerating themselves through reproduction. In this sense, we are all “pregnant” in some way, desiring to give birth to things or ideas. By taking on a beautiful beloved, a lover is able to give birth in beauty.

Yet this grasp at immortality through reproduction is only the most superficial route to immortality. Diotima explains that as the lover becomes initiated into the rites of love, discrimination of beauty begins to fade away. The lover’s object transcends the individual body, then many bodies, then all bodies, then customs, then general knowledge, to arrive finally at the true form of Beauty. The entire world comes to be beautiful “itself by itself with itself.”<sup>42</sup> This initiated lover partakes in immortality not through generational change, but through the eternal sameness of the forms.

At this stage, the lover is able to orient his life to true virtue because he is in touch with the true forms. The lover’s mad devotion to the beloved over all possessions and others stands as a testament to this orientation. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates connects this type of devotion to the beloved to worship of the gods. Every soul, during the procession, follows a particular god. In the pederastic relationship, the boy allows the man to “track down [his] god’s true nature using [his] own resources.”<sup>43</sup> In turn, lovers “pour [love] into the soul of the one they love in order to help him take on as much of their own god’s qualities as possible.”<sup>44</sup> Love then explicitly connects the soul’s visions of the forms and the lover wishing to recollect it.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 207D.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 211B.

<sup>43</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 252E.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 253A-B.

In Kierkegaard's interpretation, the erotic lover falls victim to a poetic misunderstanding – he seeks eternity without universality. By directing his passion to the beautiful, the erotic lover loves out of preference, unaware that the world of preference and particularity is diametrically opposed to the world of universality and eternity. In the temporal world, all must die. There is no way to achieve eternity with the prospect of death.

Applying this interpretation to Plato reveals a sad picture: Plato's eros yearns for a reality that cannot be realized. The very madness that recollects the soul's vision of true reality and dream of immortality is a defining characteristic of our earthly mortality. Perhaps Plato's lover too is caught by the riddle, "that everything must blossom...and alas, it must perish."<sup>45</sup> As long as love yearns, it cannot be immortal; if love cannot be immortal, it cannot cease to yearn.

Erotic love necessarily involves desire. In Socrates' allegorical myth of the winged chariot, the dark, crazy horse is responsible for the motion of the soul. At the sight of a beautiful boy, the white horse stands back for fear of embarrassment even though he is struck by the boy's beauty. The black horse, however, violently leaps forward against the strain of the other horse and the charioteer. Begrudgingly, the two controlled elements allow the soul to move forward and engage in sexual activity, leading to a recollection of the experience of the true reality.

Though the crazy dark horse ultimately drives the human soul to recall true beauty through earthly beauty, it also originally prevents the soul from safely experiencing true reality in the procession. The gods calmly march with two obedient horses, and while the other souls battle in the chaos below. The souls incapable of control descend into mortal bodies, where desire comes to define their relationship with the divine. As mortals, the love is all we have to partake in immortality, and it is *distinctly* mortal.

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<sup>45</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 8.

Structured this way, love makes us look directly to heaven for truth. The lover “takes wing and flutters in his eagerness to rise up, but is unable to do so” because of his mortality.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, oriented toward truth yet not partaking in it, the lover disregards political existence as a lower, illusory truth. Yet, as he still lives in the particular, mortal world, a new hierarchy emerges based on our relationship to true reality. The philosopher then, has most access to truth, then the statesman, then the artist, and so on down.

Thus, love as a divinely inspired madness seems to be a distinctly mortal feature, which can recollect our experience of true reality but never recreate it. Love compensates for the soul’s loss of immortality inadequately; the divinely inspired madness pushes us to recollect an experience beyond our mortality, yet simultaneously bars us from escaping it. As long as we are mortal, we will love; immortality would make us cease to do so.

From this perspective, the similarities between Plato’s erotic lover and Kierkegaard’s poet are glaring. The lover seems caught in the same poetic misunderstanding that turns the poet’s life into a riddle. He invests all his passion into the beloved to the point of worship. But the beloved is a mere preference, and cannot offer eternity. While the lover looks to heaven and hopes for immortality, like the poet, he loses sight of the sad truth of mortality.

### ***Eros in Existentialism***

However, this analysis misses a crucial contrast in the existential orientations of Kierkegaard’s and Plato’s erotic lovers. This point is particularly important given Kierkegaard’s infatuation with the individual’s relationship with being. If love is indeed locked into particularity and yearns in vain for immortality, this suggests that love does not accomplish anything. The erotic lover, by Kierkegaard’s account, is erroneous in his judgment that he has the

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<sup>46</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249D.

highest, meaning that his story must end sadly – at some point erotic love must end. However, Plato's erotic lover emerges a changed man. Diotima describes the lover after ascending the erotic 'ladder' to be profoundly happy:

“...when he looks at Beauty in the only way Beauty can be seen – only then will it become possible for him to give birth not to images of virtue (because he's in touch with no images), but to true virtue (because he is in touch with true Beauty). The love of the gods belongs to anyone who has given birth to true virtue and nourished it, and if any human being could become immortal, it would be he.”<sup>47</sup>

Here the erotic lover seems to have gained something that cannot be stripped away by death. Though Diotima is aware that temporal immortality is impossible (unlike the poet), his existential orientation has changed such that he acts according to “true virtue.” He seems astutely aware of the difference between mortal reality and true reality. Clearly, *something* is gained by this experience. In the words of Socrates: “the prize [the lovers] the have won from the madness of love is considerable.”<sup>48</sup>

By looking deeper into his particularity, the Plato's lover seeks self-knowledge. In the *Phaedrus*, this self-knowledge gained from erotic love is necessary for the lover to achieve this type of transformational existential experience. As Socrates settles down to converse with Phaedrus, he remarks: “I am still unable ... to know myself; and it really seems to me ridiculous to look into other things before I have understood that.”<sup>49</sup> This “ridiculousness” of seeking external knowledge before self-knowledge is what drives Socrates to criticize the writer and the rhetorician. A philosopher – “wisdom's lover” – first seeks “what is truly written in the soul concerning what is just, noble, and good” which “he may have discovered already within himself.”<sup>50</sup> This wisdom can only be discovered through the dialectic – the activity of lovers.

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<sup>47</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 212A-B

<sup>48</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 256D.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 229E-230A.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 278A

This “true” knowledge attained from the philosophical exploration of oneself is not really a knowledge that belongs to the individual. Rather, it is a divine knowledge, a knowledge of the forms. The philosopher described by Socrates in the end of the *Phaedrus* does not attain his “own” sense of justice, nobility, or the good. He enters into an existential relationship with the divine and is personally able to grasp “true” knowledge, but that does not make it *his*. In the same vain, the lover at the top of Diotima’s ladder does not behold his “own” form of beauty. This erotic lover sees “the Beautiful itself ... not polluted by human flesh or any other great sense of mortality.”<sup>51</sup>

When the lover in the *Phaedrus* sees a beautiful boy and is reminded of the form of beauty, “the stream of beauty that pours into him through his eyes warms him up and waters the growth of his wings.”<sup>52</sup> The memory of the forms can be described as the “true” knowledge inside each human – in order to be human at all, the soul must achieve some vision of the forms. The soul does not have “true” knowledge itself, but rather witnessed it externally in the procession of the gods. This process of growing back of the wings is the existential realignment of the individual according to the forms. The philosopher, engaged in love, lives a “life here below [that] is one of bliss and shared understanding.”<sup>53</sup> His nourished wings offer his soul the hope of a quicker return to the procession

Plato’s lover journeys down into his particularity, focusing on himself instead of the external world for “true” knowledge. What he achieves, however, is something distinctly not his, and moreover, not particular. Diotima describes the form of beauty

“Nor will the beautiful appear to [the lover] in the guise of a face or hands or anything else that belongs to the body. It will not appear to him as one idea or one kind of knowledge. It is not anywhere in another thing, as in an animal, or in earth, or in heaven,

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<sup>51</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 211E.

<sup>52</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 251B.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 256A.

or in anything else, but itself by itself with itself, it is always s in one form; ...this does not becomes the least bit smaller or greater or suffer any change.”<sup>54</sup>

Every mark of particularity as articulated by Kierkegaard – body, inclination, temporality – perverts the truth that Plato’s erotic lover achieves. Through eros, the lover achieves an external relationship with the eternal realm, and on this basis reorients his life to virtue..

This way, the lover erotic lover defies Kierkegaard’s either/or. Kierkegaard’s Christian participates totally in universality and as such eschews particularity. The poet participates totally in particularity, and is therefore mistaken in his grasp at the “highest.” For Kierkegaard, reason dictates that these relationship valid. Plato’s philosopher-lover, however, goes against these two interpretations by searching deep within himself and producing something divine.

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates relates that our reason is created by our soul’s exposure to the forms. Reason is what makes us distinctly human; because human souls in the gods procession see some true reality, humans are able to “bring perceptions together into a reasoned unity.”<sup>55</sup> This process means that earthly perceptions cause our minds to recollect the concepts ‘embodied’ in the forms. Reason categorizes our perceptions according to the forms our souls viewed. Therefore, souls that saw more true reality (i.e. philosophers) have more ability to reason.

However, mortality dictates an asymptotic relationship between our soul’s exposure to true reality and our ability to understand it. No matter how powerful one’s reason might be, he cannot cross the threshold of immortality. Just as in the ‘sad yet beautiful’ picture of love, humans are constrained in reason by life and death. Plato’s answer to this tension is madness. Reason cannot lead to an existential apprehension of immortality, but madness can.

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<sup>54</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 211A-B.

<sup>55</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249C.

The structure of Plato's work repeatedly suggests that reasoned accounts of love are inferior to mad ones. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates gives a reason argument in favor of the non-lover over the lover. When he tries to leave, however, he is overcome by a "very uneasy feeling... that 'for offending the gods [he is] honored by men.'"<sup>56</sup> Though from a reasoned, human perspective, his speech was satisfying, it was offensive in the immortal realm. To escape punishment from the gods, he must complete the speech by praising love. Subsequently, Socrates begins with a rather ordered explanation of love; he delineates four types of madness and attempts to prove the immortality of the soul. The following section, however, breaks into a wild mythological account of the nature of the soul and what it means to love. This structure suggests that reason, which implies breaking a subject down into its appropriate parts, can only go so far. For an account to be effective, it must escape reason through madness.

A similar theme emerges from Socrates and Phaedrus' discussions of rhetoric and writing. Rhetoricians and writers seek immortality through the generational longevity of their work. This way, rhetoric and writing give the appearance of completeness without actually containing it. Rhetoric pursues "what is likely and leave[s] the truth aside" to fit the speech to the crowd; writing provides students "with the appearance of wisdom, not its reality."<sup>57</sup> These stale forms of knowledge, lacking divine inspiration, are mere images that cannot be oriented to the true reality; they must be regarded only as amusement. The living discourse of dialectics, however, "makes the seed [of an idea] forever immortal and renders the man who has it as happy as any man can be."<sup>58</sup>

From here, the necessity of divinely inspired madness to perceive truth becomes clear. Rhetoric and writing are associated with reason in that they meticulously dissect ideas such that

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 242D.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 272E, 275A.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 277A



they can be understood by all. In Kierkegaard's terms, writing operates universally in that all can understand language. By contrast, the dialectic is a personal experience shared by lover and the beloved. Dialectics and the pederastic relationship are intimately linked – literally. The madness of recollecting the form of Beauty through the beloved allows the lover to share in immortality and live through true virtue. Their means is the living dialectic, captured by the madness of love.

From these accounts there emerges a fundamental difference between Kierkegaard's and Plato's erotic lovers. While Kierkegaard's poet and lover obey the reasoned account of their task, Plato's lover embraces madness. In doing so, certain lovers (i.e. philosophers) can overcome the reasonable limits of relationships to existence. By madly pursuing self-knowledge, the philosopher can gain a "true" knowledge of the divine impossible for reasonable mortals.

### ***Reconciling Plato's Madness and Kierkegaard's Faith***

If the experience of Plato's erotic lover defies the reasoned account of the either/or, how does Kierkegaard include the profound experience of Plato's philosopher-lover? In recasting the range of existential experiences in Christian terms, Kierkegaard does indeed separate erotic love from Christian infinite resignation. However, it seems the type experience characterized by Plato's philosopher-lover must be accounted for. Kierkegaard isolates this unique experience of the erotic lover into the unique experience of the knight of faith.

Plato's erotic lover, by inquiring about the nature of himself and his soul – his own particularity – achieves a relationship with the divine impossible for mortals otherwise. By holding onto and dwelling on his particularity instead of focusing on external knowledge, the philosopher-lover orients his life according to "true" knowledge and thus practices "true" virtue. Kierkegaard replicates this relationship to the divine in his knight of faith. Abraham holds onto his particularity, believing in a paradox, while simultaneously submitting to divine command.

Kierkegaard describes that the knight of faith to lives a worldly, finite life, and gets the most joy out of simple pleasures. He is virtually indistinguishable from any other man, and yet he still achieves the infinite on this paradox.<sup>59</sup>

The method of each is similar as well. The Platonic lover's madness is a "divinely inspired release from normally acceptable behavior."<sup>60</sup> The "true" knowledge the lover achieves is only accessible to the lover in his experience. Because this relationship deals with *his* soul (though it is not *his* knowledge), it cannot be understood by others. Behavior that is socially irrational makes perfect sense in his divinely twisted logic. In the same way, neither Kierkegaard himself nor anyone else can understand the paradox upon which the knight of faith makes his "leap." Reason can go as far as to sketch the horizon of faith, but cannot penetrate it. Therefore, the knight of faith remains socially alone – he is silent because he *cannot* speak and be understood.

Even Socrates' critique of writing and rhetoric can be seen as manifest in Kierkegaard's critique of the poet. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates concludes that anyone who writes "a political document which he believes to embody a clear knowledge of lasting importance," then he should be condemned, "even if the crowd praises it with one voice."<sup>61</sup> This "author of laws" who has not apprehended "true" knowledge seeks immortality admiration of his work. This is the same "poetic misunderstanding" that Kierkegaard ascribes to erotic lovers and the poet. By swearing on their lover forever, by producing art, by being admired, these agents of particularity seek the highest but are fooled.

The result of these congruencies is that Kierkegaard recreates the range of existential experiences available to the erotic lover in Christian terms. Plato clearly does not present all

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<sup>59</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 44-47.

<sup>60</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 256A.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 277D-E.

lovers as capable of being fully actualized philosophers. Some are wrapped up in their mortality, seeking to immortalize themselves through children, writing, or art. Only the select, fortuitous few souls acquired enough knowledge of the forms to be initiated into the rights of love. At the top of Kierkegaard's existential ladder we find the knight of faith, then the Christian resigning himself to God's law, then the erotic lover sadly bound to his particularity.

Kierkegaard's act of 'raising' erotic love to agapic love does nothing to expand or limit the range of existential experiences available to the individual. Clearly, he does constrain the immense power of Plato's erotic love by recasting it as *only* particular. However, he does so with the caveat that Christian mechanisms (i.e. God's law and faith) will fill in where classical ones (i.e. the state and productive madness) once operated.

Recasting erotic love in Christian terms allows Kierkegaard to create a very different image of these same existential relationships, perhaps more suited to a project of criticizing the Christian Church. The knight of faith goes about his task with the "fear and trembling" of uncertainty while the erotic lover falls into something resembling an ecstatic frenzy. At the core, however, these experiences represent the same paradigm – that reason does not govern all of philosophy. It is through passion, be it of love or of faith, that we explore the outer limits of our finitude.

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