

**Kierkegaard: On Selfhood, Love, and Politics**

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Søren Kierkegaard is often viewed as Christian thinker whose work is primarily directed at the individual. As Kierkegaard often begins his writings with a note to the individual, his work has been viewed as only serving the single individual who wishes to become “an essentially human person in the religious sense.”<sup>1</sup> Consequently, scholars have approached Kierkegaard’s writing as something which has taken on an ‘asocial tone’.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, as the following will show, Kierkegaard’s thought is intimately concerned with the role of the individual within society and with the way that an individual’s conception of selfhood and love affects relationships, as well as broader themes, such as the human existence and the creation of genuine community. The following will build upon the scholarship which discusses Kierkegaard’s thought on social and political matters. It will reflect primarily upon two of Kierkegaard’s works: *The Sickness Unto Death*, published under his pseudonym Anti-Climacus, and *Works of Love*, published under Kierkegaard's real name. These works focus on the inward relationship between the individual and God, highlighting the effect that this first relationship has on all other relationships that an individual pursues in his life. The following will analyze Kierkegaard's thought concerning friendship, despair (*fortvivlesle*) and its effect on the way individuals engage in relationships in a socio-political setting. It is the claim of this investigation that an individual's failure to escape despair– failure to recognize himself as a spiritual self– mires all his other relationships under the condition of despair and only through an inward relationship with God is the individual able to build and sustain ethical relationships in society.

1 Søren Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 96.

2 For examples of such scholars consult: Theodor W. Adorno, “On Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love,” *Studies in Philosophy and Social Sciences* 8 (1939): 413-429., where Kierkegaard is said to be friendships unequivocal enemy; Sandra Lynch, *Philosophy and Friendship* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), where Lynch claims that Kierkegaard 'dismiss[es] friendship and [erotic] love altogether, as essentially forms of idolatry or self-love', pg. 35; Lorraine Smith Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), where Pangle says that Kierkegaard 'with bold intransigence, rejects friendship as unchristian,' pg. 3; L. Mackey, “The Loss of the World in Kierkegaard's Ethics,” in *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Essays*. ed. J. Thompson. (New York: Anchor Books, 1972), where Mackey says that Kierkegaard 'means to say that the individual is really isolated from other beings, receiving from them neither support, insistence, opposition, nor allurements', pg. 279; etc.

The following concentrates on two works of Kierkegaard's which offer insight into despair, selfhood, and relationships: *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Works of Love*. Although both of these texts are written as edifying and upbuilding discourses, they are different in numerous ways, most noticeably the name under which Kierkegaard has chosen to publish. Throughout his written work, Kierkegaard has operated under three names: J. Climacus, Anti-Climacus, and Kierkegaard. Each of Kierkegaard's chosen names has its own viewpoint and purpose:

J. Climacus has much in common with Anti-Climacus. But the difference is that while J. Climacus places himself so low that he even admits to not being Christian, Anti-Climacus gives the impression of taking himself to be a Christian to an extraordinary degree, occasionally even of taking Christianity only to be for demons, though not in an intellectual respect... He has himself to blame for conflating himself with ideality (this is the demonic element in him), but his account of the ideality can be quite true, and I bow to it... I put myself [Kierkegaard] higher than J. Climacus, lower than Anti-Climacus.<sup>3</sup>

In this way, it can be seen that Anti-Climacus, the name under which *The Sickness Unto Death* was written, is Kierkegaard's 'hyper-Christian' personality. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard leaves no room for the possibility that Christianity might be full of lies and falsehood. Conversely, under his own name, S. Kierkegaard, Kierkegaard takes a more moderate approach. J. Climacus, another pseudonym, whose published works will not be discussed here, takes a lower approach and can be seen as anti-Christian. Anti-Climacus can be seen as presenting an 'ideal form' of Christianity, and of selfhood and relationships, that Kierkegaard believed that he himself fell short of. Therefore, while *The Sickness Unto Death* describes an ideal form of inward relationship with God, it must be rationalized with the more moderate approach of *Works of Love* in order to analyze a Christian take which Kierkegaard believes that society is capable of attaining.

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<sup>3</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, 20 vols. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (augmented), ed. Niels Thulstrup (Copenhagen: Gylendal, 1968-79), 332, quoted in Alastair Hannay, introduction to *The Sickness Unto Death*, by Søren Kierkegaard, trans. and ed. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Group, 1989), 15.

Therefore, this investigation will concentrate on bridging the two works in order to build upon Kierkegaard's assertion that God is present in all relationships. It will argue that only through an individual's recognition of himself as a spiritual self, as asserted in *The Sickness Unto Death*, can healthy relationships and friendships be attained, as *Works of Love* indicates and expands upon. The first goal of this investigation will be to demonstrate that individuals who suffer from despair also suffer from inadequate and unethical relationships. The second goal will be to show how an individual attains an inward relationship with God and the effect that this will have on his outlook concerning others, specifically in terms of neighbour love and preferential friendship.

Finally, this investigation will assert that Kierkegaard is not an enemy to friendship, contrary to conclusions of many scholarly works, and that Kierkegaard believes that preferential friendship can be rationalized if it is pursued properly. This means that all participating individuals will have removed themselves from despair and will have been able to recognize themselves and each other as spiritual selves. The following will show that if neighbour love serves as foundation for all other relationships, an individual will act with regards to the worth and dignity of others, contributing to an increasingly more 'ethical society', and, furthermore, a more responsible and connected society. An 'ethical society' can be understood as a community of individuals who associate based on a mutual affirmation of the worth and dignity of every person. Therefore, under this lens, the thought of Kierkegaard does not hesitate to address the role of society, politics, and relationships, and rather confronts this idea of community through his persistent doctrine of selfhood and of his assertion of the commandment: "You Shall Love."

## **Chapter Two: A Society Without God**

Kierkegaard believes that individual attainment of selfhood presupposes *any* ethical society. Kierkegaard's view is that in order for ethical relationships to form in society, society first needs to have a conception of God, which is attained through self-recognition (selfhood). Kierkegaard's view is therefore guided by a sense of personal selfhood, arguing, as he does in both *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Works Of Love*, that a relationship with God is necessary before an individual can attempt to forge relationships with others in the modern world. Kierkegaard asserts at the end of *Works Of Love* that Christianity has made every one of an individual's relationships into a God-relationship.<sup>4</sup> This God-relationship highlights Kierkegaard's claim that an individual must deal with God in *everything*, which highlights God's importance for relationships in modern society and in modern politics.

Kierkegaard maintains that the most important and the first relationship an individual has to form is one of inwardness: one of oneself before God. This is vital to being able to act ethically in society. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard develops this dialectic, showing that an individual's experiences drive him towards a sense of personal selfhood. This 'personal selfhood' is indicative of a individual relating to himself in the correct way, which allows him to gain knowledge of God, recognize himself as a spiritual self, and begin to love himself in the correct way. This allows an individual to then relate to others. When an individual achieves this intimate relationship with God, Kierkegaard calls it 'selfhood'. But, when an individual fails to relate to himself and to God in the correct way, Kierkegaard believes that he falls into a condition of misery, which Kierkegaard calls *fortvivlelse*, or 'despair'.

Kierkegaard understands selfhood to be a synthesis or a process: it is a “‘spirit’ in a human being ... emerging from a state of innocence in which human fulfillment [selfhood] is regarded simply

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4 Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 376.

as development of human nature.”<sup>5</sup> The failure to complete the synthesis and achieve selfhood results in an inadequate consciousness of self. Despair, therefore, is frequently described by Kierkegaard as a failure by an individual to complete his journey towards selfhood. As selfhood indicates an acceptance of God and consciousness of both the self and of a higher power, despair, according to Kierkegaard, is indicative of an individual's nonalignment with God or with God's plan for the self. In this way, an individual loses or is unable to attain his self. Thus, despair is the condition of the human being when he has denied the self or the power which created and sustains the self.

Kierkegaard understands despair to be a sickness of the self. Despair exists when the self is out of balance. It is a misrelation caused by a human being failing to attain the self; failing to complete the synthesis of terms, as described in the following section, and by the failure of the human being to establish himself in something higher. Without this synthesis of the self, a human being exists in despair, which in turn mires all relationships, including those of inwardness. Furthermore, the condition of despair affects all relationships within society as an individual cannot accept himself, let alone others.

This idea of despair is crucial to Kierkegaard's critique of the present age, and modern society, which is discussed further on in this account. Kierkegaard sees the present age, specifically modern politics, as an example of a failed relationship between God, self, and, by consequence, others. Modern politics is simply a form of despair as it lacks an important spiritual element, which is selfhood. This dialectic of selfhood will be developed later, but first it is important to understand what society looks like without God— when those who make up society, and consequently the society itself, are in despair.

## **I. Despair**

Kierkegaard explains that the “less spiritual someone is, the less adapted they are to social

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<sup>5</sup> Alastair Hannay, introduction to *The Sickness Unto Death*, by Søren Kierkegaard, trans. and ed. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Group, 1989), 4.

circumstances [and the more] they are ... inclined towards the solitude.”<sup>6</sup> Kierkegaard argues that in order to be fully capable of living outside of despair and participating in healthy relationships, an individual must attain a level of ‘spiritness’. ‘Spiritness’ is the presence of an individual’s consciousness of himself as a spirit, or as something which is intimately tied to the spiritual, or God. Despair, tied to an individual’s level of consciousness, is intensified when an individual is not able to access the spiritual or chooses not to access the spiritual. This is because an absence of consciousness, or an ignorance of consciousness, removes an individual from God; the less conscious an individual is, the farther he is removed from God. Additionally, as briefly mentioned before, despair consists of an imbalance within the self. It exists first as a process in human development, but can become dangerous when an individual is unable to move past despair and into consciousness and selfhood. In the cases where the individual is stalled in the development to selfhood, it can be catastrophic for relationships.

Within *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard offers numerous examples of relationships which have been overcome by despair. There are three main forms of despair: ‘the despair that is ignorant of being despair, or the despairing ignorance of having an eternal self’ (ignorance, or unconscious despair); ‘In despair not to will to be oneself: despair in weakness’ (weakness); and ‘In despair to will to be oneself: defiance’ (defiance).<sup>7</sup> The manifestations of these types of despair within society will be discussed in the section that follows.

### *A. Despair of Ignorance*

*The Sickness Unto Death* first turns to an account of despair of ignorance. This is a despair “that is [ignorant] of being in despair or the despairing ignorance of having a self and an eternal self.”<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard explains that an individual who suffers from this form of despair is not aware that despair

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<sup>6</sup> Hannay, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. and ed. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Group, 1989), 47.

<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 73.

exists (as the individual does not understand what selfhood means), nor is he aware that he suffers from despair. Simply put this form of despair amounts to the ignorance of being a self.<sup>9</sup> The individual who suffers from the despair of ignorance is someone who suffers from what Kierkegaard claims is an 'unconscious' despair.

Kierkegaard claims that the main problem with an individual suffering from this type of despair is that he is unable to recognize how to realize the self that he already potentially is. In this sense, this individual often is unable to recognize his own despair, or his own selfhood, as he is concerned with judging his life based on unethical measures of happiness. This individual is not concerned with a relationship with God or with others, but with the temporal concerns of natural man, who Kierkegaard claims is self-interested, rational and seeks only to further worldly ends. As this individual, suffering from the despair of 'ignorance', has not attained selfhood, he has not come to understand himself, and his relationships, as a spiritual category, and rather maintains concerned only with the temporal. This individual who suffer from 'despair of ignorance', then, is conditioned solely by his surroundings, rather than by the ethical-religious outlook which selfhood brings about.

This type of despair is found most commonly in the 'crowd'. Kierkegaard argues that 'the crowd' is purely concerned with propelling their own individual happiness. He argues that these individuals are in despair because they have wrongly judged what is important in life: rather than being concerned with spiritual elements of life, these individuals are solely concerned with what they judge as the ideal way to make themselves happy. Kierkegaard argues that this is done primarily through the pursuit of worldly pleasures, such as wealth, food, alcohol, travelling, or entertainment. An example of this would be a society composed of individuals who are not interested in pursuing any spiritual pleasures or in bettering the society around them, but are only interested in furthering their own position in life. These individuals would be concerned with the amount of money in their bank account, with the beauty of the

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<sup>9</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 42-47.

things they own, or with their standing in the social hierarchy, but not with the ethical well being of society as a whole.

In modern society, this type of despair would be evident in individuals such as CEOs of corporations who are uninterested in giving away their wealth, and rather accumulate it and base their self-worth on how much money they are able to make. Additionally, despair of ignorance could also be evident in individuals who are only interested in buying themselves designer clothes or attending music festivals or in politicians which are unconcerned with social welfare, but rather just the success of corporations. Kierkegaard argues that these individual's concerns with pursuing their own interests— what they deem as important to happiness— indicates their despair. These individuals are seen as only concerned with worldly pleasures and their lack of pursuit of any spiritual or ethical nature to life indicates how ignorant they are of God and of their self. These human beings are part of the 'crowd' and are understood by Kierkegaard as only displaying the qualities of 'natural man'. This 'natural man', therefore, is simply physical and psychical, and has no advantage over the animal. This poses a problem for Kierkegaard as these individuals have no consciousness of their spirit and are unable to relate to something grander in order to attain selfhood.

In this type of despair, Kierkegaard explains that relationships in society are marred as the individual in question is deeply removed from God, caught up in one of the 'excess' factors, which will be developed in the next chapter. This changes this individual's orientation in life and keeps him from contributing ethically in society. Kierkegaard argues that this individual can still live a 'normal' life, but at a deeper sense his life can be seen as superficial.<sup>10</sup> By this, Kierkegaard means that this individual is missing the true meaning of life, which Kierkegaard interprets as a connection to God and an ethical outlook towards others in society. As the individual in despair of ignorance is concerned with other things and not with what Kierkegaard interprets as ultimately important, his life is seen as deficient— or

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<sup>10</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 60.

superficial.

This indicates that, because of an individual's lack of focus on others, he is unable to relate to others correctly and can forge only false and negative relationships which do not originate in God's love. The relationships which this individual forges are akin to the self-love relationships which Kierkegaard describes in *Works on Love*, which will be discussed in later on in this investigation, where an individual only loves for his own sake, rather than for the sake of others.

Kierkegaard states that this type of despair is the most common form of despair amongst individuals in the world. For Kierkegaard, these relationships are deficient and are part of modern politics' problem. Additionally, the despair of ignorance is analogous with the Crowd and modern politics, as discussed at the end of this chapter.

### *B. Despair of Weakness*

The second form of despair is "the despair that is conscious of being despair and therefore is conscious of having a self in which there is something eternal and then either in despair does not will to be itself or in despair wills to be itself."<sup>11</sup> It can also be called the despair of not wanting to be oneself or 'the despair of weakness'. The despair of weakness can be divided into two categories: despair of not wanting to be oneself and despair to be a self at all. In this type of despair, an individual sees himself as unworthy and either wishes to not be a self or to have a new self. Rather than work towards attaining selfhood, an individual wishes to lose himself in another, by which Kierkegaard means that an individual wishes to construct his identity through the characteristics which another evokes, therefore making the other more important than himself and losing all individuality, or to sink away from a relationship with God. Therefore, this despair is classified by a reluctance to head towards selfhood.

In *Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard gives two examples of this form of despair: 1) a man who

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<sup>11</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 50.

wishes to be Caesar; and 2) a young girl who has lost her lover. In each of these examples, the relationship of the two individuals are marred by despair: neither has the spiritual consciousness to positively develop relationships, either inward or outward.

First, Kierkegaard discusses the example of a man who wishes to be Caesar and despairs over the fact that is he is unable to. This man is power-crazed and wishes only to vacate himself and become Caesar, which Kierkegaard believes indicates that the man “cannot stand being himself precisely because he failed to become Caesar.”<sup>12</sup> In this case, Caesar represents the image of perfection. Caesar possess the qualities and identity which the man sees as being necessary for success and happiness. To be anything less than Caesar is unacceptable, so the man aims to lose his own self to inhabit that of Caesar. Therefore, Kierkegaard stresses that the man really despairs unto himself, as he despairs “not over not becoming Caesar, but over himself for not having become Caesar.”<sup>13</sup> The man is therefore in despair as he cannot get rid of himself: he cannot cease to exist as his own being and slip into Caesar’s. This example exemplifies despair as the man despairs over who he is and therefore has no consciousness of his spiritual self. As the man is unable to be comfortable with his own being and cannot embrace his own self, he is in despair.

In the second example, Kierkegaard describes the relationship between two ex-lovers. The young girl in this relationship “despairs over losing the loved one, because he died or became unfaithful.”<sup>14</sup> Kierkegaard explains that the young girl is actually despairing over herself, as now that her lover is gone she has to face the fact that she must now be a self in her own right, rather than clinging to and becoming lost in the self of her lover.<sup>15</sup> Like in the example of Caesar, Kierkegaard explains that this young woman is despairing unto herself, as she wishes to be rid of herself and be able to fade into the existence of her lover.

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12 Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 49.

13 Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 49.

14 Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 50.

15 Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 50.

Despair of weakness is also found in modern society. For example, this despair is indicative in the situation of a young woman who aspires to look and act identical to the model or actress on the front of a magazine. This young woman wishes to lose the qualities that she herself possess— both her external qualities such as physical traits and her mannerisms— and take on the identity of the model or actress. This example is indicative of many young woman in modern society and is identical to the example Kierkegaard gives of a man wishing to become Caesar. Kierkegaard would argue that because the young woman sees her own qualities and appearance as inferior to the woman on the magazine, this young woman suffers from the despair of weakness. Likewise, a man who aspires to look and feel like a popular athlete, suffers from the despair of weakness for similar reasons. These aspirations of acquiring the traits of celebrities and athletes is extremely common in modern society and indicates a lack of consciousness of the individual's own self.

Kierkegaard's second example, of the girl and her lover, is also common in modern society in the exact same form. Frequently, modern society sees examples of lovers who view themselves only in the scope of each other: they are completely engrossed in the other and do not know themselves outside of the other. When one loses the other— the relationship fades or the couple breaks up— one of the individuals may see themselves as completely lost without the other. This exemplifies the despair of weakness and is an example that is still evident in modern society.

Kierkegaard believes that the faults in these relationships are caused by an individual's lack of selfhood. These examples not only exemplify how an individual is in despair, but show how an individual's despair can negatively impact an individual's ability to associate with others. In this first example, the relationship between the man and Caesar is characterized by envy and inferiority. Kierkegaard maintains that these emotions are created because of a lack of understanding on behalf of the man who wishes to be Caesar in regards to his individual worth. Primarily, this is because the man does not understand his spiritual value and his value in relation to God. As a consequence, he sees

himself as unworthy and inferior to others and wishes to replicate Caesar's personality as his own. Kierkegaard argues that the man's inferiority-complex when regarding Caesar could be rectified by increased conception of selfhood in the man who wishes to be Caesar, as if the man were to develop consciousness of his ability to be a self and ground himself within God, his understanding of the value of himself, and of others, would increase, allowing him to appreciate his own characteristics. Furthermore, the man would be able to recognize the qualities that he and Caesar share— primarily their relationship with the eternal— and would be able to base their relationship in God's love, rather than in negative emotions. The man's lack of recognition of himself implies that there is no spiritual aspect to this relationship, marring the relationship under despair.

The relationship of the two ex-lovers also shows how relationships can be marred by despair. The individuals within the relationship are in despair as one or the other is unable to recognize themselves as a self, as the young girl has done here. The young girl, like in the previous example, sees her traits as unworthy or inferior to her lover and seeks to lose herself in him in order to make up for that deficiency. Again, this is caused by her lack of consciousness of her own value and spirituality. Kierkegaard argues that the key to correcting this relationship would be for the girl to attain knowledge of her own self, raising the awareness of her connection with the eternal and the others' relationship with the eternal. This would allow each to recognize the other as ethical and spiritual human beings. Additionally, Kierkegaard also argues that when selfhood is attained, an individual no longer constructs his identity in vain. In the example of the girl, if she were to attain selfhood, her identity would no longer be falsely constructed, allowing her to realize her full potential and to be comfortable in her own self, rendering problems, such as the examples above, mute. For these reasons, Kierkegaard strongly asserts that despair of weakness harms external relationships in addition to harming an individual's relationship with God.

### C. *Despair of Defiance*

Despair of defiance is the lowest form of despair. It is also the rarest, argued by Kierkegaard to be primarily found in poets. Kierkegaard calls this type of despair 'demonic despair' and describes it as a "despair to will to be oneself."<sup>16</sup> It is characterized by an individual desperately wanting to be himself. The individual who suffers from this form of despair understands that he is in despair, therefore possessing a higher level of consciousness than the other forms of despair, and the individual also seeks to alleviate despair, but is unable to do so. As a result of his inability to combat despair, the individual hardens and turns against help, refusing help even from God and severing himself from any relationship to the power that has established him. Instead, the individual chooses to deal with his despair in his own way. The individual feels either that God has betrayed him or let him down because he is unable to correct his despair. Therefore, this despair is characterized by individuals who wish to take control of their own selfhood, removing themselves from God's presence and forging their own identity.

The individual who suffers from demonic despair chooses to take notice of no power but his own. The human being wishes to be his own master and attributes significance only to his own decisions: God is viewed as a second-rate author and the individual now stands, errors and all, in defiance to God's actions and mistakes.<sup>17</sup> This is indicated when Kierkegaard states that "even if God in heaven and all the angels offered [the individual] aid, he would not want it."<sup>18</sup> This type of despair, therefore, manifests in the human beings' need to make his *own* decisions, whether these decisions be errors or not. An individual in despair of defiance wishes to have complete control over his own life and in order to do so he pulls away from the eternal, the spiritual, and everything that he feels controls his life.

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<sup>16</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 50.

<sup>17</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 105.

<sup>18</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 103.

Furthermore, at this point, the individual revels in his despair and sees his pain as what puts him above natural man. This ensures that this individual can neither relate to himself, to God, or to others, as he has segregated himself and has failed to understand himself through the eternal. Kierkegaard states that this is the mistake that these individuals have made: they have struck out against all that is eternal and, rather than reach out to God to relieve their despair, these individuals wish to set themselves free from God, further isolating themselves from society and contributing to the despair of modern politics.

## **II. Despair of Modern Politics: The Crowd**

The explanation of the synthesis of the self and of the different forms of despair is integral to Kierkegaard's understanding of how selfhood can be used to eradicate the 'sickness' of modern politics. Kierkegaard argues that selfhood creates an inner transformation. It results in a change in the way an individual views himself, but also results in a change in the way an individual views and acts towards others.<sup>19</sup> With selfhood, an individual is able to see others as spiritual equals, which changes the way individuals relate to each other. This idea of spiritual understanding and equality is the foundation of Kierkegaard's critique of modern society, as he believes that modern society does not consist of these core components.

Despair ruins all relationships. For Kierkegaard, the forms of despair are all results of the basic reality of despair— the misrelation of a self to God. Despair is a sickness developed through the misrelation of terms, as will be discussed in the next chapter, but the sickness stands behind the experiences of an individual and is revealed through his experiences. Despair is ultimately a sickness of how an individual— the 'self'— relates to God, and ultimately to others. Kierkegaard claims that nearly all individuals fail to achieve selfhood: despair is the usual, although not the normative, state for

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<sup>19</sup> Graham M. Smith, "Kierkegaard from the point of view of the political," *History of European Ideas* 31 (2005): 43.

individuals.<sup>20</sup> The misrelation which causes despair is not inherent in the human condition, but remains a possibility in everyone.

As despair is the usual condition for individuals in modern politics and society, Kierkegaard claims that unless individuals are able to attain selfhood their actions will ultimately be plagued by despair and contribute to society's despair. This leads into Kierkegaard's claim that modern society as a whole suffers from despair, as the majority of individuals who take part in society have not attained selfhood. Kierkegaard writes that once an individual has become a self, he has formed a closer relationship with God and has become a human being in the fullest sense, allowing an individual to participate in relationships ethically. Yet, socio-political relationships have been based upon a misrelation of spiritual selfhood and, in this way, are beyond the grasp of individuals who have not become selves.

In *The Present Age*, Kierkegaard writes that the modern age, the 'present' which he is observing but which shares much in common with the current age, is devoid of ethical conceptions. He articulates in the *Present Age*: “[the present age] is essentially one of understanding and reflection, without passion, momentarily bursting into enthusiasm, and shrewdly relapsing into repose. ... an age which flies into enthusiasm for a moment only to decline back into indolence. ... There is no more action or decision in our day than there is perilous delight in swimming in shallow waters.”<sup>21</sup> By this, Kierkegaard means that the present age still holds ethical conceptions, but they are devoid of meaning as they are detached from a view of life which is passionate and full of action. Kierkegaard attributes the lack of meaningful ethical conceptions in the present age to the lack of conception which individuals hold of God. A society without God takes on the form of a herd or a 'crowd': this is the form which Kierkegaard believes is indicative of modern politics.

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<sup>20</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age: On the Death of Rebellion*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 1-7.

The 'crowd' which Kierkegaard describes is, made up of individuals who have the characteristics of what he calls 'natural man'. 'Natural man' is inherently self-interested and individualistic, concerned only with the temporal and furthering his own interests. 'Natural man' is unable to see others as spiritual equals and is unable to bond with other individuals in a deep way. The only bond 'natural man' can form is one of self-interest and utility, qualities of the 'crowd', which is formed when 'natural man' loses sight of his religious selfhood and joins together with others in secular association. Furthermore, this secular association, as far as Kierkegaard is concerned, is unworthy of the term society or 'community'. Community is concerned with selfhood and with becoming a single identity. A 'community' is a sum created by individuals joining together and relating to each other in meaningful ways— all of which is created through selfhood.<sup>22</sup> A community is united under a common idea or goal, which, as will be developed later during the discussion of love, is developed through a conception of God and an obligation— a command— to love and view each other as equals. A community, therefore, becomes *more* than the individuals who compose it; but all individuals need to be eradicated from despair prior to this.

Conversely, a group of individuals who unite under conditions where selfhood has not been achieved is made up of individuals operating without responsibility or concern for the other. The 'crowd' is concerned with temporal comfort and constructs their 'identity' and actions void of concern for God, love, and ethics. As far as Kierkegaard is concerned, the 'crowd' is incapable of relating to each other in anyway and is therefore “characterless and ... [incapable] of true action.”<sup>23</sup> This failed relation is due to the fact that there is no *common* idea, or purpose, which unites the 'crowd'.

Modern societies are not connected by any internal or external idea and, consequently, can not stand in relation to one another in terms of responsibility or purpose. For the individuals of the modern age the only relationship they have is to 'number one': themselves. This differs from previous ages, as

<sup>22</sup> Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, 63; and Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, 93.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, “Kierkegaard from the point of view of the political,” 48.

the people in these ages were able to relate to a common idea. An example of this is in Antiquity, where members of society were able to relate to a great leader or individual and therefore found a common relationship amongst those in society.<sup>24</sup> This can not be said for members of the modern age, as the 'crowd' bases its entire purpose on the needs of 'natural man' and can not relate to one another in any meaningful way. This lack of connection amongst individuals causes social and political relations to be false, non-ethical and in despair.

For Kierkegaard, the needs of 'natural man' is not enough to constitute a society; he believes that society needs a common idea in order to unite and argues that the bond humans should have should be one based upon God. As selfhood requires a conception of God, attaining selfhood brings God into everything that an individual does. This is because an individual who is founded through God constructs his identity through God. When an individual relates to God, he no longer finds his personality or character in vain, but rather attains his 'true qualities' through God, gaining a further understanding of himself. Furthermore, not only is the individual's personality being founded and grounded in God, so are the qualities needed for relationships. In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard explains this by saying "a person's love originates ... in God's love."<sup>25</sup> This explanation implies that only through God can an individual begin to understand love and how to love others: God is needed in order to accurately express this emotion. Thus, through His influence in defining an individual's characteristics and love, God becomes ever-present in relationships.

Additionally, God's presence in relationships creates individual understanding. When an individual holds a conception of God his understanding of others deepens. This is because, as Graham M. Smith writes: "just as individuals must come to understand that they are both temporal and spiritual, and that they stand before God, so must they recognize that all others share these characteristics."<sup>26</sup> This

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24 Smith, "Kierkegaard from the point of view of the political," 48-49.

25 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 9.

26 Smith, "Kierkegaard from the point of view of the political," 47.

understanding that both the individual and the other are the same, or at least share spiritual qualities, creates an increased sense of responsibility towards each other. Selfhood, therefore, supplies a basis for an ethical-religious basis of community, allowing communities to survive and base themselves on a single idea: God. Kierkegaard claims that this cannot happen when individuals, or society, are in despair as they fail to relate to each other in ethical ways.

It is in this way that it can be seen that selfhood is extremely important for community to exist and for modern society to flourish. An individual conception of God— a relationship of inwardness— is integral for communicating with others. Kierkegaard is firm that before an individual can have a relationship with others, he needs to understand himself through God and ground himself entirely in God. This is the only way that an individual can raise himself above 'natural man' and be able to associate outside of the temporal, for the only relationships which can work, according to Kierkegaard, are those concerned with the spiritual. For Kierkegaard, true ethical conduct, the basis of a strong, functioning society, is only possible when individuals accept the concept of selfhood, and furthermore attain selfhood. As God is necessary for ethical-religious relationships, which stem from love, a product of a connection with God, when the 'crowd' exists it is indicative of an individual being unable, or refusing to, find a connection with God.

### **III. The Next Step: From Despair to Selfhood**

This chapter has demonstrated that when an individual suffers from despair, his entire life and all his relationships suffer as well. Under the influence of despair, an individual is unable to maintain relationships with others and is also unable to regard himself, and others, in an ethical light. Despair, as this chapter has stated, leaves an individual alone and without bonds with anyone else, and leads society to take on the form of 'the crowd', an unethical body of individuals with no connection or responsibility to one another. It is therefore the conclusions of both this chapter and of *The Sickness*

*Unto Death* that despair leads to negative connotations in both an individual's life and in the 'life' of society.

In what follows, Kierkegaard's argument for attaining selfhood, which is key to moving out of despair and away from the problems of the 'crowd', fostering authentic community and relationships, stemming from his understanding of neighbour love, will be discussed. Specifically, it will be discussed how Kierkegaard views the selfhood as the solution to despair, as it prompts recognition that all individuals are spiritual equals before God. Kierkegaard argues, as articulated by Graham M. Smith, that modern politics has failed to “understand the human being as essentially a spiritual entity related to others through God.”<sup>27</sup> For this reason, the focus of the following chapter is the foundation of ethical relationships: selfhood and ethical-religious love.

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<sup>27</sup> Smith, “Kierkegaard from the point of view of the political,” 47.

### **Chapter Three: Selfhood and Ethical-Religious Love**

Kierkegaard believes that human beings need to make the move into selfhood in order to be healed of despair. To do this, Kierkegaard believes that a human being needs to complete the synthesis between mind and body and make a conscious decision to ground himself in the eternal and spiritual. For Kierkegaard, this move into selfhood is the first logical move towards ethical-religious love. Selfhood has profound ethical implications for an individual, allowing him to experience the true value of other human beings and, consequently, see everyone as equals before God. This begins a transition into a series of relationships amongst societal members where each feels a responsibility towards the other, causing modern society to turn away from despair and become increasingly ethical.

Therefore, Kierkegaard's account of the self must be understood if an understanding of Kierkegaard's social and political thought is to be reached. As established before, Kierkegaard's critique of modern society is tied to his account of selfhood, as he sees the modern world, specifically modern politics, as an example of a failed relationship between God, self, and others. Modern politics is simply a form of despair as it lacks an important spiritual element, as well as a common idea for people to united over, all of which is tied to selfhood.

*The Sickness Unto Death* discusses the possibility of loss of self: it introduces the concepts of selfhood and of despair and develops how each of these affect an individual. The 'sickness', despair, for Kierkegaard, is the denial of the Christian life, and the inclination to believe that for an individual death is the end.<sup>28</sup> Despair is spiritual in its form and is a sickness of the spirit. Selfhood, therefore, is a state of being that exists when a human being has eradicated this spiritual sickness. It exists when an individual become conscious of his potential to be a self and has accepted that his existence is grounded in something eternal: God.

Kierkegaard argues that as a human being moves towards selfhood, he needs to synthesize a

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<sup>28</sup> Hannay, 3.

series of key oppositions, which, if successful, forms the 'self'. The following will detail this process, explaining how 'natural man' makes the transition to a selfhood, and furthermore how society moves from the 'crowd' to a community of selves who feel a responsibility towards the other.

## I. Selfhood: The Terms

Kierkegaard believes that despair is a 'reluctance' to move towards selfhood. Despair comes to those in a crisis "in the form of a choice between well-being (or salvation) and a fully conscious rejection of Christian teaching as 'untruth and a lie'."<sup>29</sup> As developed in the previous section, there are numerous forms of despair, each differing because of the level of awareness that an individual has concerning both his 'sickness' and his progression, or capability, for selfhood. These levels of despair are indicative of an individual choosing to reject Christian teachings, as he has chosen not to move towards a relationship with God. In many forms, despair is characterized by a human being being unconscious of his capability for selfhood. Selfhood, therefore, is grounded in consciousness, by which Kierkegaard means an individual's awareness of his potential to become a self, and a choice of well-being due to the acceptance of God in his life.

Kierkegaard argues that the more 'conscious' an individual is that he is a self, the higher degree of selfhood he has attained. When self-awareness is low and conscious selfhood is non-existent, there is despair. Therefore, *The Sickness Unto Death* is primarily focused on teaching its readers how to face the spiritual challenges of becoming conscious— of becoming a self. The fundamental fear of selfhood or an individual's "unconsciousness of being characterized as a spirit"<sup>30</sup> is the reality which Kierkegaard seeks to combat and is what he calls 'despair'.

In order to understand Kierkegaard's explanation of selfhood and despair, as well as his conception of the structure of the self, the reader is expected to identify and connect two principal

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

<sup>30</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 55.

components. The first of these two components is a set of opposites. This includes: ‘infinite’ and ‘finite’; ‘freedom’ and ‘necessity’, and ‘eternal’ and ‘temporal’.<sup>31</sup> Kierkegaard explains that the human being is a synthesis of these opposites, or ‘factors’. When these sets of opposites are synthesized correctly, meaning that one factor in each set does not overpower or outweigh the other in the set, the human being forms a key second component: the self.

The first component deals with the set of oppositions which need to be kept in balance.

Kierkegaard argues that when one extreme overpowers the other, it distorts the human being and moves him farther away from God. An imbalance of these characteristics does not portray someone of ‘good mental health’ and rather exemplifies despair. For example, Kierkegaard argues that an individual who gives into the infinite, with no balance of the finite, loses himself to imagination, whereas an individual who does the opposite and has no balance of the infinite, is confined and limited. Losing oneself to the imagination is a problem for Kierkegaard as it causes the self to become increasingly agitated and restless. This means that it becomes increasingly harder for an individual to make his way back to himself and increasingly harder for an individual to imagine a life with boundaries— a life before God. Imagination, therefore, causes an individual to be carried off so far away that God and himself becomes just an abstraction. On the other hand, becoming bound by the finite is a problem because it creates an idea of narrowness, including ethical narrowness. Being bound by the finite causes an individual to be interested only in worldliness and causes him to have no sense of the spiritual and ethical things which are necessary for a full life.<sup>32</sup>

Kierkegaard argues that there needs to be an element of each in the other: to eradicate despair, an individual must allow imagination to be present in every-day life. Likewise, Kierkegaard argues that to have freedom which is not balanced by necessity is to treat everything as if it was inconsequential. In this area, the healthy balance is found when the freedom to do whatever is balanced the realization that

31 Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 59-61.

32 Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 62-63.

it is necessary to do certain things.<sup>33</sup> When an individual finds himself with a surplus of freedom, he is unable to get anywhere, rather he “exhausts [himself] floundering about in possibility, yet ... never moves from where [he] is nor gets anywhere.”<sup>34</sup> What Kierkegaard shows here is that being bound in possibility makes it impossible for an individual to move toward selfhood as he is constantly reflecting on everything else that *might* be possible, rather than what *is* and *needs* to be possible. When an individual reflects in possibility, he loses himself. Conversely, when an individual is caught up in necessity, he loses the conception of God because for God everything is possible. An individual who focuses solely on necessity loses the ability to conceive of God because he is focused on what he can see, touch or what is directly in front of him.

Finally, there also needs to be balance found in the third polarity: eternal and temporal. This polarity is key to the ‘consciousness’ of the self. It is key to understanding that while there is something fundamentally temporal about the human being, specifically the temporal space in which an individual exists, there is also something eternal about the human being. This balance is struck as an individual becomes aware of the ‘self’, as an individual finds that he is grounded in something eternal. An individual who lives in imbalance is “defrauded of [the] most blessed of all thoughts.”<sup>35</sup> the concept of God. When an individual has a surplus of one of the factors, Kierkegaard argues that he is defrauding himself of his spiritual ties to God or of his temporal ties to the world around him. In order to live a complete life, an individual has to have a comprehension of both, and therefore the oppositions must be balanced.

But, if an individual is able to balance these sets of oppositions, he can form the second component of Kierkegaard’s explanation: the self. When a ‘self’ is attained, an individual has reached a point where he has gained a conception of God and is able to balance the sets of oppositions. A ‘self’

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33 Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 59-61.

34 Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 66.

35 Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 57.

therefore indicates someone who has conceived of a healthy balance of the oppositions. Whereas someone who possess an extreme of one of the oppositions operates under despair, a 'self' achieves perfect balance and has eradicated this problem.

Kierkegaard's reader is also expected to understand the meaning of three important terms which relate to a human's consciousness of self, the second key component. These are: the human being, the spirit, and the self. The human being is, quite simply, the temporal part of the individual— it is the body, the part which occupies the temporal space in which the individual exists. For Kierkegaard, this is the simplest part of the formula. The spirit and the self are more important for his analysis.

Kierkegaard defines the 'spirit' as the part of a human being which is emerging from innocence and beginning a journey of human development.<sup>36</sup> The 'spirit' exists prior to a human being becoming conscious of a self and is seen as the quality which raises human beings above animals. It represents a capability for selfhood and consciousness of a self. The 'spirit' in *The Sickness Unto Death* is identified as a 'self' once it has reached a certain point of 'consciousness' or self-awareness. Therefore, the 'spirit' indicates the category that a human being exists in prior to starting the synthesis. 'Spirit' is solely a name given to the *capacity* that human beings have to rise above animals and above 'natural man'. Therefore, whereas a 'self' can not exist in despair, a 'spirit' still can. When the 'spirit' moves into selfhood, it transitions from a 'spirit' into a 'self' as it becomes “a relation relating to itself,”<sup>37</sup> meaning that it has become a state of being which is completely self-related, that is, a complete relation between mind and body. Kierkegaard believes that this relation between mind and body takes place when a human being understands that he does not only exist in the temporal realm, but that he also has a spiritual element.

These components and definitions are extremely important to Kierkegaard's explanation of selfhood, but as Kierkegaard does not completely define them, it can lead into an account of selfhood

<sup>36</sup> Hannay, 10.

<sup>37</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 43.

which is convoluted, complicated and sometimes opaque. Yet, this terminology is important for understanding how selfhood arises. Kierkegaard writes that achieving the right balance of oppositions (ie. the correct synthesis of reflective factors, all which must be present in the human being) can be understood as ‘selfhood’. Selfhood requires that an individual have a conception of God. As noted before, a fear of this self-awareness, such as the fear held by those suffering from demonic despair, or inability or reluctance to be conscious of an individual’s self, is called ‘despair’.

Despite the description of despair as undesirable, despair is a ‘sickness’ that serves a purpose. As discussed before, ‘despair’ comes in many forms, all of which are part of spiritual development. Kierkegaard argues that despair offers an avenue to ‘truth and deliverance’ and it is only through despair, which is part of human development, that self-awareness can be found. Individuals need to fall into despair in order to see that being grounded in God is the only option for selfhood and healthy spiritual awareness.

Kierkegaard’s account of selfhood allows him to situate the individual socially and spiritually. The individual self is central to Kierkegaard’s understanding of every relationship a human being will ever have and therefore is understood as a necessary component of each individual’s life. Selfhood is a task. According to Kierkegaard, every individual is responsible for becoming a self: each individual is tasked with actively pursuing a relationship with God. The logistics of this complicated process is the focus of the next section.

## **II. Pure Selfhood: The Move into Selfhood**

Selfhood is a state which comes about after the synthesis of factors which are ever-present in the human being: ‘infinite’ and ‘finite’; ‘freedom’ and ‘necessity’, and ‘eternal’ and ‘temporal’.<sup>38</sup>

Kierkegaard argues that as these factors are recognized and balanced, a human being moves towards

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<sup>38</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 59-61.

full comprehension of selfhood. He claims that a human being begins his journey under the condition of 'despair' but is eradicated from this condition based on his life experiences. These life experiences help a human being become more 'conscious' and move towards selfhood.

Kierkegaard opens *The Sickness Unto Death* with a passage that offers a detailed, yet convoluted, explanation of what it is meant to be a human being who attains selfhood. This passage describes the human being as a spirit and that the spirit is the self. Kierkegaard writes: "The human being is a spirit. But what is a spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates to itself, or that in relation which is relating to itself. The self is not the relation but the relation's relating to itself."<sup>39</sup> In this, Kierkegaard says that selfhood is a relation, as has previously been developed through the analysis of the 'factors' which constitute a human being. Kierkegaard also sets out in this paragraph three primary definitions which are integral to the entirety of his discussion of selfhood and despair. These are the human being, the spirit, and the self, as per the definitions outlined in the last section.

Kierkegaard describes the human being as a spirit and describes the spirit as a self, but warns that the human being, as looked at in this excerpt, has not yet become a self. Rather, the human being is the condition which exists *prior* to the synthesis. The self, a term which Kierkegaard defines in two ways, is recognized in this passage to take the form of a verb, rather than a noun, as Kierkegaard intends for the self to be identified as a process. The self is defined as a *relation*, but it also defined as the "relation of relating to itself,"<sup>40</sup> which recognizes the self as not a static definition, but as a synthesis of the terms 'infinite' and 'finite'; 'freedom' and 'necessity', and 'eternal' and 'temporal,' as developed in the previous section.

This paragraph also accents Kierkegaard's belief that the 'self' is only possible when it has been established as a relation: a relation both of the numerous 'factors', but also of a relation of itself,

<sup>39</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 43.

<sup>40</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 43.

through its recognition of its possibility of being grounded in God. First, this means that the human being is *always* a spirit, but can only transition to a 'self' by becoming something concrete: to become something which is both 'infinite' and 'finite'; both 'free' and acting on 'necessity'; and both 'eternal' and 'temporal'. When a balance of these terms is reached, the 'spirit' transitions into a 'self'. A balanced relation between this term is what Kierkegaard means when he defines the self as a *relation*. The self needs to strike a balance between the sets of oppositions and relate them together. Without this relation of the human being and the spirit, the first two terms, and without the synthesis, the human being cannot be called a self: he has not completed the process.

Second, there also needs to be a relation within the self. Kierkegaard believes that there needs to be a relation where the human being relates to its *true* self (the self which it is capable of being) through recognizing and striking a balance between the factors, but also as a relation between himself and something else, as a "self cannot by itself arrive at or remain in equilibrium."<sup>41</sup> This means, that the human being can not transition to selfhood on his own. The human being needs to establish self-consciousness, which is done through an increasing comprehension of God, as, for Kierkegaard, it is through God that the individual is able to realize his true self. For this reason, Kierkegaard claims that a healthy balance, or a successful synthesis of terms, means that the individual has been able to stand, as a single human being, directly before God. The individual needs to accept and comprehend that God exists and is important in his life prior to being able to become a self. The individual, therefore, needs to be 'conscious' of the idea that his existence is because of God.

A disassociation of the self takes place because the self has failed to relate itself to itself, or failed to have been established by God. This means that the individual has failed to remove himself from the condition of 'despair'. This is further enforced when Kierkegaard writes that in order to complete this relation, the self must be established by another power and must relate to this other power

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41 Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 45.

in the correct way. Kierkegaard identifies this other power as God, writing: “Then this is the formula which describes the state of self when despair is completely eradicated: in relating to itself and in wanting to be itself, the self is grounded transparently in the power that established it.”<sup>42</sup> This means that selfhood is *only* possible when God is brought into the equation: God is ultimately needed for *any* human being to move out of despair. God, therefore, establishes the entire relation and maintains the existence of the individual at equilibrium. This is the relationship of inwardness: a relationship between the individual and God. Kierkegaard maintains that after this relationship of inwardness has been established, the individual can begin to establish relationships in other areas of his life.

Therefore, the ‘self’ is a synthesis of opposites which are self-relating but are also dependent on an individual relating to God and an individual's true self. To truly be a self, an individual must relate to the “power that established it”<sup>43</sup> and in this way selfhood is a spiritual concept as well as a relational one. A self which fails to conceive of these relations is marred by despair. Crucially, then, selfhood is seen as an element that recognizes the relation of the temporal parts (the physical and psychical) of an individual with the spiritual. To attain selfhood, a human being is dependent on seeking a relationship with God. This leads to the conclusion that as a human being who has not conceived of God is subject to relationships suffering from despair, selfhood must presupposes society and God must be present in all societal relationships.

### **III. Ethical-Religious Love: On Relationships**

While *The Sickness Unto Death*, the focus up until now, discusses the move of an individual into selfhood and how an individual conceives of God, *Works of Love* serves an entirely different purpose. In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard discusses the ethical responsibilities and obligations which individuals, who are able to conceive of God, have towards each other. For Kierkegaard, individuals

<sup>42</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 44.

<sup>43</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 44.

who are unable to conceive of God or who pull away from God form individualistic and self-interested, societies characterized by 'the crowd'. For those who have attained selfhood and have a conception of God, Kierkegaard believes there are two forms of relationships which these individuals can forge: neighbour love (*kjerlighed*) and preferential love (*forkjerlighed*).<sup>44</sup> In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard discusses how each of these relationships can be forged, arguing that an individual needs to attain neighbour love prior to being able to reach a level of spiritual and existential consciousness that he can participate in erotic friendship without consequences. All forms of these relationships are directly tied into the discussion of selfhood and despair held previously, as love and ethical obligations *originate* in God: individuals need a conception of God to be able to form these relationships.

#### *A. Preferential Love: Erotic Love and Friendship*

Kierkegaard uses the term preferential love, or *forkjerlighed*, to describe erotic love and friendship. Preferential friendship includes relationships such as the beloved, family and friends; individuals who are chosen for 'special positions' in an individual's life over and above others. This type of love is viewed by Kierkegaard as an inferior category of relationships in society, in comparison to neighbour love, based on his concern that these relationships do not contain any "inherent ethical or spiritual quality and that they can quickly distort the universal command to love if not understood properly."<sup>45</sup> In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard gives a critique of preferential love, arguing that it can often be mistaken for self-love as an individual is choosing select individuals over God. Kierkegaard believes that preferential love is "to love a person more than God"<sup>46</sup> which he argues results in despair.

Kierkegaard thesis in *Works of Love* is that preferential love is an incomplete form of love as it draws an individual closer to the beloved or friend, a 'preferred companion', while simultaneously excluding

<sup>44</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 52.

<sup>45</sup> John Patrick Haman, "The sanctification of friendship: reconciling preferential and non-preferential loves in Søren Kierkegaard's Works of love" (MA thesis., The University of Iowa, 2011), 14.

<sup>46</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 19.

all others. To understand Kierkegaard's critique of preferential friendship a definition of friendship must first be understood.

When most people think of friendship, they think of it as just *existing*. Most look at the people who surround them and know that these are the individuals with whom they have decided to have an intimate, personal relationship with. Friendship is thought to be had with those who an individual shares his time and energy, and their friendship is characterized by a shared connection. 'Friends' are the people with whom an individual speaks with the most, with whom he seeks contact and comfort, and with whom he wishes to spend his time. Most people would agree that the ideal friendship is characterized by an underlying 'love' between two people based upon joint feelings of affection and responsibility. But further than that, most people do not ponder the question of friendship in any great detail: friendship just *is*.

Yet, understanding the true nature of friendship can lead to better understanding, and a greater capacity, concerning how to cultivate better relationships in society and how to foster a better sense of community. The following definition, given by Gilbert Meilaender, in his book *Friendship, A Study in Theological Ethics*, sums up friendship as most people understand it: “[Friendship is] not love in general; rather, [it] is a deep attachment to and preference for another person because of the sort of person he or she is.”<sup>47</sup> In this way, an individual is friends with someone to whom he is attracted, regardless of whether he can cite specific reasons for that attraction, but this person is valued over and above another. Friendship differs from neighbour love, Kierkegaard's ideal form of love, based on the simple fact that friendship, by nature, is exclusive. Friendship is limited in scope: an individual does not extend friendship to everyone, but rather only to those who possess characteristics or virtues that an individual finds attractive.

Therefore, the first indication of friendship is that it is preferential. Friendship is directed at a

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<sup>47</sup> Gilbert Meilaender, *Friendship, a Study in Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 53.

particular human being based on characteristics he has that another individual finds “attractive or choiceworthy”<sup>48</sup> or when an individual has existing qualities which correspond with qualities of another individual. For example, an individual who enjoys classical music might be inclined to seek the companionship of another individual who shares that interest and less likely to seek the companionship of someone who detests classical music. Likewise, an individual who possess a boisterous sense of humour is likely to seek companions who share his sense of humour, and less likely seek out the company of those who are more reserved.

In this way, an individual seeks the companionship, or 'friendship', of those who share similar characteristics to himself, or who exhibit characteristics that allow this individual and his 'friend' to connect on a deep level. An individual's unique personality allows him to appreciate and enjoy the unique characteristics of another person. When an individual finds these qualities in another he forms a preference for that person based on *specific* characteristics unique to *that* person. In other words, friends are chosen due to the *specific* type of person they are.

However, the presence of a deep attachment is not equivalent of friendship until the attachment is reciprocated. Individuals seek friendship as they have a desire not only to give love, but also to be loved in return. Friendship, therefore, is a relationship that holds the necessary component of reciprocity:

What we need and desire in friendship is not merely the return of our love. We need a relation of both giving and receiving between free and equal participants. To give only for the sake of getting a return must poison the relationship from the outset. And the same is true of giving in such a way that the other is not left free to reject our offer of friendship.<sup>49</sup>

This shows how friendship is necessarily a reciprocal relationship. As far as friendship goes, individuals seek out these relationships not only because they wish to *give* love but because they want

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<sup>48</sup> Meilaender, 3.

<sup>49</sup> Meilaender, 46.

to be loved in *return*. Individuals are concerned with feeling loved and participating in relationships which make them feel like they are special or like they possess characteristics which are unique and valued. In this way, friendship is issued not only for the sake of the *other* but also for the sake of an individual's self. 'Friendship', by its very definition, involves reciprocity as it involves both affection and desire.

Friendship, in this way, demonstrates two aspects that can not be eliminated: preference and reciprocity. Kierkegaard's characterization of preferential love is extremely similar: he believes that preference and reciprocity are indicative of the major problem of preferential love. This is outlined when Kierkegaard writes: "Christianity has misgivings about erotic love and friendship simply because preferential love in passion or passionate preference is actually a form of self-love."<sup>50</sup> Kierkegaard believes that preferential love "resides in the *I*, in the *self*"<sup>51</sup> which encourages it to search for "the *other I*."<sup>52</sup> The other I is considered to be the individual who best reflects the original self.

Therefore, Kierkegaard believes that the problem with preferential love is that it is extended purely out of selfishness. This is illustrated through the first problem: preference. Kierkegaard recognizes that an individual does not call everyone his friend but rather only a few, characterizing these relationships of love primarily in terms of inclination and desire. An individual chooses his friends based on his own preferences and desires, which reflects a self-directed interest. Secondly, the issue of self-love is represented through the reciprocal nature of friendship. For Kierkegaard, preferential love involves an individual seeking his own to love. It is therefore a form of self-love as an individual is looking for individuals to love who will provide him with a sense of gratification. This, according to Kierkegaard, is extremely dangerous and leads to despair and to a love that can wither, fade or become habit, leaving the one who does not recognize these symptoms to plummet into despair.

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50 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 53.

51 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 53.

52 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 53.

Reciprocity also, according to Kierkegaard, removes any *moral* sense from love: an individual is not exhibiting love because he sees worth in all human beings, but because of the characteristics he values in himself which are reflected in others.

Furthermore, Kierkegaard writes that “passion always has this unconditional characteristic—that it excludes the third.”<sup>53</sup> Kierkegaard is concerned with preferential love being exclusive as he believes that in loving someone as a friend or a lover, the individual is forced to distinguish between those he has affection for and those he does not, abandoning an outlook of equal regard for everyone. Kierkegaard also argues that the problem with preferential friendship is that as individuals bind themselves together, they lose sight of the collective:

By being exchanged, *mine* and *yours* become *ours*, in which category erotic love and friendship have their strength; at least they are strong in it. But *ours* is for the community exactly the same as *mine* is for the solitary one, and *ours* is indeed formed—not from the contentious *mine* and *yours*, because no union can be formed from that—but is formed from the joined, the exchanged *yours* and *mine*.<sup>54</sup>

In other words, the more two people attach themselves to one another, the more they withdraw from society. The 'friends' just become a larger version of 'mine' and the individuals are now participating in the relationship purely for their own sake. This removes them from society and demonstrates an unethical action or immoral outlook towards society as a unit of equals.

Finally, Kierkegaard argues that preferential love ultimately leads to despair as it is loving another more than an individual loves God. As an individual becomes entirely focused on another, withdrawing from everything else, God can often be forgotten. This leads to the conclusion that preferential love, at its base, is not developed fully in accordance with God. An individual who is unable to love both the neighbour and the friend properly, as will be developed later on, has not originated his love in God, meaning that he has not fully become a self. To avoid these problems,

<sup>53</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 50.

<sup>54</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 266-267.

Kierkegaard encourages individuals to first exhibit neighbour love, a type of love he believes avoids the pitfalls of preferential love.

### *B. Neighbour Love*

Unlike preferential love, Kierkegaard believes that neighbour love is a love that is “eternally secure.”<sup>55</sup> The foundation for Kierkegaard's endorsement of neighbour love is found in Matthew 22:39: “But the second commandment is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”<sup>56</sup> Here, Kierkegaard begins his explanation of neighbour love as a spiritual obligation. As individuals exist in the temporal realm, Kierkegaard understands that individuals will have specific needs that must be met outside of themselves. An individual's inclination to meet and unite with others is an instinct that can not be fulfilled completely by a relationship of inwardness. For this reason, Kierkegaard grounds his understanding of sociality in the commandment found in Matthew 22:39. He makes this decision in order to fully reflect the importance of God and revelation in human existence. As developed previously, without the influence of the divine and the eternal in human relationships, individuals would be largely ignorant of the spiritual portion of their existence. As ethical notions are founded within God and an individual's connection with the spiritual, when an individual lacks consciousness of God, he falls into unethical patterns in society and is unaware of the true nature of love.

Therefore, the commandment “You Shall Love” contains a fundamental divine quality. It is for this reason that Kierkegaard argues that an individual's “love originates ... deeply in God's love.”<sup>57</sup> God is necessary for love to exist, meaning that an individual must have a conception of God prior to being able to engage in neighbour love. The commandment of “You Shall Love” is one which gives spiritual knowledge to individuals who otherwise would have no sense of it. The commandment brings together

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<sup>55</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 29.

<sup>56</sup> Matthew 22:39-4 (New Revised Standard Version).

<sup>57</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 9.

the temporal and spiritual. Elaborating on this, Kierkegaard writes:

There at the boundary where human language halts and courage fails, there revelation breaks forth with divine origination and proclaims what is not difficult to understand in the sense of profundity or human parallels but which did not arise in any human being's heart. It actually is not difficult to understand once it has been expressed; indeed, it wants only to be understood in order to be practiced, but it did not arise in any human being's heart.<sup>58</sup>

This reflects how the commandment “You Shall Love” is instilled in an individual only through the movement of an individual towards the spiritual. It is for this reason that selfhood, as discussed before, is incredibly important to the development of neighbour love, and furthermore to any relationship of preferential love. “You Shall Love” is a way of understanding how individuals are to respond to God and how individuals should respond to others, specifically, treating everyone as if they were a neighbour (ie. “you shall love your *neighbour*”).

The neighbour refers to 'all people'. Specifically, the neighbour refers to the individual who is physically nearest to an individual than anyone else;<sup>59</sup> which is meant to imply the law is fulfilled by an individual loving the individual he happens to encounter, no matter who that individual may be or whether there is a preexisting relationship. This does not mean that an individual needs to love everyone—near or far—simultaneously, but needs to exhibit love for all those who he encounters: “to be sure, 'neighbour', in itself is a multiplicity, since 'the neighbour' means 'all people,' and yet in another sense one person is enough in order for you to be able to practice the law.”<sup>60</sup> This leads into Kierkegaard's later assertion that all human beings have value and that an individual who expresses neighbour love and follows the law is able to recognize this when he encounters others.

Furthermore, Kierkegaard believes that the neighbour is one who is equal. The neighbour “is neither the beloved, for whom you have passion's preference, nor your friend, for whom you have

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<sup>58</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 25.

<sup>59</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 21.

<sup>60</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 21.

passion's preference. Nor is your neighbour ... [the] individual with whom you have similarity of culture.”<sup>61</sup> Unlike preferential love, an individual does not choose these people by preference but because of their shared relationship with God:

The neighbour is every person, since on the basis of dissimilarity he is not your neighbour, nor on the basis of similarity to you in your dissimilarity from other people. He is your neighbour on the basis of equality with you before God, but unconditionality every person has this equality and has it unconditionally.<sup>62</sup>

Therefore, Kierkegaard strives to encourage an individual throughout *Works of Love* to put aside “dissimilarity and its similarity”<sup>63</sup> so that an individual can love the neighbour. Kierkegaard is describing that when love is grounded in God, an individual is prescribed with a predisposition that recognizes value in each and every human being. Furthermore, an individual is able to express this recognition when encountering another. This means that although each individual has unique characteristics, there is a spiritual value present in every human being. This ties into Kierkegaard belief that when an individual attains selfhood, as previously discussed, he is able to recognize in others what is also present in himself, as an individual sees himself and others in Gods image.

Therefore, when an individual learns to exhibit neighbour love, he has not only learned to love others in the correct way, but have also learned to love themselves properly:

To love yourself in the right way and to love the neighbour correspond perfectly to one another; fundamentally they are one and the same thing. When the law's as yourself is wrested from you the self-love that Christianity sadly enough must presuppose to be in every human being, then you have actually learned to love yourself. The Law is therefore: You shall love yourself in the same way as you love your neighbour when you love him as yourself.<sup>64</sup>

This asserts the neighbour is *every* person, including the individual himself. Neighbour love, for

61 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 60.

62 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 60.

63 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 61.

64 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 22-23.

Kierkegaard, implies that an individual learns to love all of people equally and sees his own worth and the worth of others before God. When an individual attains selfhood, he is able to recognize the 'neighbour' inside of himself and has begun to love the 'neighbour' inside properly; leading to the discovery of neighbour love for others. Therefore, neighbour love is primarily an inward task of “affirming the value of other individuals, independent of emotion, inclination or instinct.”<sup>65</sup> Neighbour love, in contrast to preferential love, is not concerned with preference or reciprocity, but rather remains entirely focused on the way individuals *ought* to treat other people.

It is this discovery that sparks the responsibilities which society has to the other. Neighbour love is an obligation. It operates on the basis of equality— specifically, equality that is based upon “their being human and their being called to become more fully human in a relationship [with God].”<sup>66</sup> This ethical love is what remains at the centre of *Works of Love*: an obligation to love the neighbour, equally and unequivocally. Whereas Kierkegaard argues that neighbour love is obligated, it seems contradictory to speak of preferential love in terms of an 'obligation'. Friendship, as a principle, is grounded upon the idea that an individual can freely enter into it. To be 'obligated' to enter into friendship seems to violate the implicit nature of 'choice' that is built into these relationships, as well as will not generate any genuine reciprocal love. Conversely, Kierkegaard believes that it is precisely the obligation to love that saves neighbour love from many of the shortcomings of preferential love.

Preferential love is susceptible to change and despair, whereas neighbour love has overcome this. Kierkegaard writes: “Only when it is a duty to love, only then is love eternally secured against every change, eternally made free in blessed independence, eternally and happily secured against despair.”<sup>67</sup> Kierkegaard argues that preferential love is susceptible to numerous things. Specifically, preferential love can diminish: friends can be lost, love can be removed without much notice, or love

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65 Haman, 18.

66 Haman, 20.

67 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 29.

can fall into habit. This can lead an individual into despair:

The despair is due to relating oneself with infinite passion to a particular something, for one can relate oneself with infinite passion— unless one is in despair— only to the eternal. Spontaneous [preferential] love *is* in despair in this way, but when it becomes happy, as it is called, its being in despair is hidden from it; when it becomes unhappy, it becomes manifest that it was in despair.<sup>68</sup>

Preferential friendship, for Kierkegaard, manifests as despair as it is grounded in the temporal. He believes that to avoid encountering despair, love must be grounded in God. Neighbour love avoids the tendency to fall into despair as it *is* grounded in God through the force of the command. The force of the command ensures that neighbour love can not change or fall away without notice. Neighbour love is defined through the spiritual and exhibits an inner continuance that does not allow it to change or be affected by absence.

Neighbour love, as the purest form of love, continues to endure and is not weakened by any circumstance. Kierkegaard uses the following example to exemplify this point:

Does the dance end because one of the dancers has gone away? In a certain sense. But if the other remains standing in the position that expresses bowing toward the one who is not seen, and if you know nothing about the past, you will say, 'The dance will surely begin just as soon as the other one, who is awaited, comes.'<sup>69</sup>

In this sense, Kierkegaard argues that neighbour love has no beginning nor end. Neighbour love always exists. It endures all circumstances and is unaffected by weakened or changing emotions. Conversely, preferential love fails to endure if the friend or lover goes away or is taken away. Preferential love needs reciprocity, so when the object of the love is removed, the love is removed as well.

The same is said for habit. Kierkegaard writes: “Alas, of all enemies, habit is perhaps the most cunning.”<sup>70</sup> *Works of Love* indicates that habit can become the result of all preferential, temporal loves,

68 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 40.

69 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 307.

70 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 36.

as love of passion or preference does not always sustain itself over time. Rather, it fades and becomes routine. When an individual awakens to realize this— that love has faded and habit has alluded them— he realizes he is in despair. Neighbour love does not fall victim to this as it is unchanging.

Finally, neighbour love is saved from despair because it is ultimately grounded in selfhood. When an individual becomes a self, through the process developed earlier this chapter, he is overcome with a conception of God. This concept of God allows an individual to understand both himself and others as spiritual selves and allows an individual to see that these newfound qualities in himself also exist in others. Selfhood promotes a sense of 'equality' amongst human beings. Furthermore, selfhood allows for an individual to love himself as their identity is constructed through God. It allows an individual to participate in proper self love:

The commandment said, —You shall love your neighbour as yourself, but if the commandment is properly understood it also says the opposite: You shall love yourself in the right way. Therefore, if anyone is unwilling to learn from Christianity to love himself in the right way, he cannot love the neighbour either. He can perhaps hold together with another or a few other persons through thick and thin,‘ as it is called, but this is by no means loving the neighbour. To love yourself in the right way and to love the neighbour correspond perfectly to one another; fundamentally they are one and the same thing.<sup>71</sup>

This passage indicates that in order to exhibit proper love of others, an individual must first love himself. This is done through selfhood, meaning that selfhood is the primary ingredient in Kierkegaard's search for the perfect love as it allows an individual to understand both himself and others in a moral sense.

Neighbour love is equal, unchanging and commanding. For Kierkegaard it is the purest form of love as it is founded in God and is eternally free. Additionally, neighbour love is safe from the pitfalls of preferential love as it is a *duty*: neighbour love is an ethical obligation which individuals have to one

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<sup>71</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 22.

another, a matter that will be discussed more thoroughly in the fourth chapter. Nevertheless, it is duty, for Kierkegaard, which is liberating: it saves one from despair.<sup>72</sup>

#### **IV. Conclusion: Selfhood and Friendship**

In this chapter, the logistics of selfhood, of preferential love and of neighbour love have been outlined. This chapter has shown how an individual comes to attain 'selfhood' and has shown that selfhood allows an individual to maintain a greater sense of God and to ground both himself and love in God, allowing the individual to move forward into neighbour love. This chapter has also outlined the reservations Kierkegaard has regarding preferential love. In the following chapter, neighbour love and preferential love will be bridged, showing how having a sense of selfhood allows an individual, and thus society, to remain focused on the dignity and worth of another individual even when pursuing preferential love. This following will show how an individual can attain 'proper self-love' and how this can be used to allow the individual to pursue a relationship that is recognizable as friendship while also meeting the demands of neighbour love.

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<sup>72</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 38.

## **Chapter Four: From Neighbour Love to Erotic Friendship**

For many interpreters of *Works of Love*, as noted in the introduction, Kierkegaard is viewed as a stark opponent of preferential friendship. Kierkegaard has been interpreted in a way that highlights and endorses that there is fundamental conflict between the special claims of preferential love, such as friendship, and the claims of universal, non-preferential loves such as the Christian neighbour love, in Kierkegaard's thought. Kierkegaard has been viewed as taking a position that these loves can not exist simultaneously. Therefore, in this view, an individual is faced with a choice: “either love God and neighbour at the expense of intimate relationships or defy God by binding ourselves together in selfish, worldly loves such as friendship.”<sup>73</sup> For these interpreters, Kierkegaard is seen to be committed to the view that an individual can not love everyone equally, or shown universal concern for all, if an individual also wishes to maintain a circle of friends to which he devotes extra time and energy. The debate between preferential friendship and neighbour love has been interpreted as a stark either/or: have one or the other, but an individual may not have both.

Despite these either/or claims, it has been argued by numerous scholars<sup>74</sup> that the either/or viewpoint initially present in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* is reconcilable. The objective presented here, and argued in approaches such as M. Jamie Ferreira's *Love's Grateful Striving*, is that this either/or viewpoint is incorrect and that preferential love which is understood in the context of neighbour love is endorsed by Kierkegaard himself. Ferreira, for example, has argued that the standard view of Kierkegaard as an enemy to preferential love is an over-simplification. This is evident as Kierkegaard

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<sup>73</sup> Haman, 2.

<sup>74</sup> Scholars that take such approaches include: M. Jamie Ferreira, *Loves Grateful Striving: a Commentary on Kierkegaard's Works of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), who claims that viewing Kierkegaard as an opponent of friendship is a vast oversimplification; John Lippit “Cracking the Mirror: On Kierkegaard's Concerns about Friendship” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 6 (2007): 131-150, who aims to rework the understanding of Kierkegaard's second self to demonstrate that includes no selfish inclinations, 131; Sylvia I. Walsh “Forming the Heart: The Role of Love in Kierkegaard's Thought,” in *Grammar of the Heart: New Essays in Moral Philosophy & Theology*, ed. Richard H. Bell (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), who claims that Kierkegaard's understanding of neighbour love takes nothing away from preferential love; etc.

claims both that “the praise of erotic love and friendship belongs to paganism”<sup>75</sup> and that “Christianity has thrust erotic love and friendship from the throne,”<sup>76</sup> while simultaneously describing erotic love as “undeniably life's most beautiful happiness”<sup>77</sup> and friendship as “the greatest temporal good.”<sup>78</sup> Kierkegaard, contrary to the beliefs of many, is arguing that it is the selfishness which exists *in* preferential love that must be rooted out. Primarily, this stems from the idea that when a human being attains selfhood and both loves and has a conception of God, he is able to love himself properly, and therefore able to love others. Therefore, the foundation of proper self-love and of preferential friendship is found in *selfhood*.

### **I. Attaining Proper Self Love**

Kierkegaard writes: “Christianity, however, knows only one kind of love, the spirit’s love, but this can lie at the base of and be present in every other expression of love.”<sup>79</sup> By this, Kierkegaard demonstrates that all expressions of love need to be grounded in the spiritual (spiritualness). As demonstrated previously in Kierkegaard's account of selfhood, spiritualness is created when an individual has a conception of God and having attained a sense of personal selfhood. Selfhood, furthermore, allows an individual to view himself in God's eyes, realizing his own true nature and allowing him to love himself properly. Kierkegaard states that when an individual is able to love and understand through God's view, he is able to see the qualities in other individuals which are similar to his own and is able to regard everyone else as *equals*. According to Kierkegaard, this is proper self-love and God is necessary for it to take place.

The problem with preferential friendship, again, is that God and others are often forgotten.

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75 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 44.

76 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 44.

77 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 267.

78 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 267.

79 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 146.

Kierkegaard believes that two people bind themselves together, causing them to lose sight of the entire world and to forget about their obligations to *all* people as neighbours. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard believes that preferential friendship is a reality which individuals need to participate in, due to their ties to the temporal realm. To emphasize the importance of these 'earthly advantages', Kierkegaard writes:

The world is no better than this; the highest that it acknowledges and loves is, at best, to love the good and humanity, yet in such a way that one also looks to one's own earthly advantage and that of a few others ... one step beyond that and you have lost the world's friendship and love.<sup>80</sup>

By this, Kierkegaard means that the world, or society, views friendship as a temporal necessity based on the benefit it gives individuals. Kierkegaard understands that, as humans are part of the temporal realm, humans need to participate in relationships that give them worldly benefit. Therefore, in order to counteract this improper self-love and allow for these sorts of relationships, Kierkegaard introduces the concept of 'self-denial', which he believes will aide an individual to move towards a fulfillment of his natural inclinations in a way that the entire world will approve of it.

Self-denial can be split into three main parts. First, a human being is required to give up all natural self-loving that acts strictly for his own satisfaction. This means that an individual needs to enter into relationships for the benefit of *others* as well as himself; an individual needs to sacrifice things for others and suspend goals which are purely selfish. In a modern context of friendship, this first motion does not seem too foreign, as an individual participating in preferential friendship often expects his friends to make sacrifices. The second part of self-denial, Kierkegaard stresses that an individual need to reject the advantage that comes with worldly sacrifice. Kierkegaard argues that an individual should be motivated to sacrifice things purely for the love of God, not for any added temporal benefit.<sup>81</sup> Finally, self-denial brings an individual closer to God and allows God into the

<sup>80</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 123-124.

<sup>81</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 236-237.; additional explanation found in M. Jamie Ferreira, *Loves Grateful Striving: a Commentary on Kierkegaard's Works of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

relationship, as the giving up of all personal benefit and all selfishness opens an individual up to the knowledge of God's love and humanity's value through God.

Kierkegaard argues that the principles of self-denial should be applied to preferential friendship in order to rectify the problem of improper self-love. He argues that if an individual is able to remove the inherent selfishness that is found in self-love by using these two mechanisms in self-denial, preferential love can be *transformed*. The command of “You Shall Love” requires that an individual's foundational regard for all human beings be in the affirmation of each individual's essential humanity, individual value, and in his purpose as a unique and irreplaceable spiritual being, grounded in God. Specifically, then, preferential love needs to be based on a foundation of neighbour love and the beginning of this is to remove the inherent selfishness in preferential love.

Therefore, it is necessary for an individual to reach out in sacrificial love in order to save preferential love. An individual needs to affirm himself as neighbours with others and constantly act in a way that is characterized by affirming himself as a spiritual being that remains independent of temporal inclinations and desires. Kierkegaard stresses that in order for love to be pure, an individual needs to act in a way that respects the dignity and value of both himself and others. Preferential love, therefore, needs to resolve the “mine” and “yours” problem which keeps an individual from viewing others as neighbours, before he views them as a friend.

Kierkegaard writes that “love does not seek its own, for there are no mine and yours in love,”<sup>82</sup> by which he means that love should not seek its own benefit. Rather, it should seek only the benefit of others. To do this, Kierkegaard dissolves the 'mine' in these relationships, arguing that the antithetical 'mine and yours' needs to be dissolved so that the selfish nature of 'mine' is done away with. When an individual does away with 'mine', he is able to reach out in sacrificial love as everything he does is in service of *another*. This affirms an individual as a neighbour, allowing his actions to be consistent with

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82 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 265.

neighbour love:

...a wondrous thing occurs that is heaven's blessing upon self-denying love- in salvation's mysterious understanding all things become his, his who had no mine at all, his who in self-denial made yours all that was his. In other words, God is all things, and by having no mine at all self-denial's love won God and won all things.<sup>83</sup>

Here, Kierkegaard resolves that when the 'mine' is dissolved and God is allowed to enter, through the employment of the principles of self-denial, the selfishness in love is done away with. Kierkegaard stresses that as only by beginning in neighbour love is an individual able to view other human beings as equals and as valuable human beings due to their spiritual nature; neighbour love is vital to a human's relations with others, prior to him being able to pursue temporal goods. Therefore, Kierkegaard is not denying that a need for temporal relationships exist, but is creating a scenario where where an individual can pursue these needs and remain respectful of human dignity. He is stressing that God is needed as a middle term in order to keep an individual concerned with his ethical obligations to another, rather than his inclinations and desires.

## II. God as a Middle Term

Kierkegaard writes that “love is a matter of conscience and thus is not a matter of drives or inclinations, or a matter of feeling, or a matter of intellectual calculation.”<sup>84</sup> By this, Kierkegaard means that proper love is intimately tied to God: He is needed for love to be pure, unselfish and for it to be sustained. Therefore, the ultimate reason explaining why preferential love can lead an individual to despair is that God has been forgotten; an individual has not reached a consciousness of God that allows Him to be present in his relationship. To exemplify this, Kierkegaard writes:

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<sup>83</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 268.

<sup>84</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 143.

However beautiful a relationship of love has been between two people or among many, however complete all their desire and all their bliss have been for themselves in mutual sacrifice and devotion, then thought everyone has praised this relationship— if God and the relationship with God has been omitted, then this, in the Christian sense, has not been love but a mutually enchanting defrauding of love.<sup>85</sup>

As God is ultimately the source of love, He is needed in order for love between people to exist outside of despair. Therefore, just as God is needed for neighbour love, as God is the source of an individual's duty to love and his orientation towards people as spiritual beings, He is also needed for preferential friendship, as when an individual is secured in God he is able to love properly. God keeps an individual focused on the duty to love and not the benefits of love. He allows an individual to fully comprehend the value of another person and allows him to embrace the intrinsic value of a friend. Additionally, God keeps an individual from falling into selfish habits as He reminds an individual of his duty to others in world, fulfilling the requirements of self-denial as discussed previously.

Therefore, when God is present in relationships of the preferential type, He allows the friend to be transformed into not 'the other I', as Kierkegaard's worries, but instead He allows the friend to become the 'first you'.<sup>86</sup> This means that as an individual enters into a friendship with another person, he is constantly reminded of the spiritual value of that person. As a sense of selfhood— a conception of God— makes an individual aware of his own spiritual value, God, when acting a middle term, makes it impossible for an individual to view people outside of God or to forget another's intrinsic value.

Therefore, friendship in the Christian sense needs God in order to function. By viewing friends through the eyes of God, an individual's friends are viewed as another self and as two distinct selves drawing together. God, when viewed as a middle term, draws people together in relationships viewed under the guise of a 'community of selves'. This 'community of selves' is created by individuals who are

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<sup>85</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 106-107.

<sup>86</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 57.

able to view others as spiritual, unique human beings each with their own connection to God. When this is done, all individuals in society are focused on the other and preferential friendship is ultimately changed to include God. Therefore, “Christianity has not changed anything in what people have previously learned about loving the beloved, the friend, etc., has not added a little or subtracted something, but it has changed everything, has changed love as a whole.”<sup>87</sup> God changes preferential love into a love which is entirely focused on the other: He removes selfishness and grounds preferential love in selfhood.

### III. Proper Preferential Love

Therefore, by entering into preferential love abiding by the rules of self-denial and God as a middle term, an individual is able to participate in a preferential love free from despair. When an individual approaches preferential love from a foundation of neighbour love, preferential love reflects spiritual love and gives friendship the conditions which allow it to function. Therefore, as Sylvia I. Walsh writes in her analysis of Kierkegaard's concept of friendship:

neighbour love [does not] prohibit us from entering into or continuing special relationships with one or more individuals. But the friend or beloved should be loved first and foremost, like others, as a neighbour. The Christian view, Kierkegaard claims, is that what is eternally made basic must also be the basis of every expression of what is special.<sup>88</sup>

As described by this, an individual can pursue any relationship as long as it is remembered that all other individuals must first and foremost be regarded as neighbours. With this in mind, preferential love can take on the characteristics of neighbour love which allow it to refrain from being consumed

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<sup>87</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 147.

<sup>88</sup> Walsh, 241.

with despair: transcendence, inclusive, and abiding. These three qualities are ones which Kierkegaard sets apart as being fundamental to the success of neighbour love, but with the introduction of self-denial and the keeping of God as a middle term, they can also be applied to preferential love.

First, it is important that preferential friendship take on the quality of transcendence.

Kierkegaard refers to transcendence as hidden depth from which love's true qualities can spring up. These 'true' qualities are understood by Kierkegaard to be neighbour love. Kierkegaard believes that when the love which originates in God, through a process of revealing and conceiving of God's presence, is applied to preferential love, an individual is able to recognize the neighbour in everyone around him. The spiritual source of that person becomes visible and an individual is compelled to have a personality responsibility towards that person. Transcendence affects an individual so deeply that he feels obligated to pursue relationships in the spirit of these qualities. Each individual action is infused with the idea of God's presence. Relationships take on a spiritual quality and God is infused in each relationship which an individual pursues. Therefore, even relationships of the preferential nature transcends into a realm which respects both the temporal and spiritual nature of another.

Secondly, preferential love must become inclusive. As mentioned before, one of the most divisive factors between preferential love and neighbour love is the scope of the love. Neighbour love implores an individual to reach out to everyone he encounters, whereas preferential friendship compels an individual picks and chooses his relationships based on qualities he enjoys in others. At a first glance this may seem incompatible, but with the introduction of self-denial and God as a middle term, preferential and neighbour love can co-exist. This is done by seeing individuals first and foremost as *neighbours*. Kierkegaard notes this by saying that spirit love, which takes the form of recognizing everyone as spiritual equals and feeling an equal obligation to all of them, must lie at the basis of every

formation of love.<sup>89</sup> Walsh further explains Kierkegaard's point by saying:

To love others as neighbours means to love them first of all on the basis of our common humanity, as fellow human beings, rather than on the basis of personal preference. Secondly, it means to exercise an eternal equality in loving by existing on an essentially equal basis for every person. Christian love, more specifically identified as neighbour love, is thus inclusive in nature and has its task the love of all human beings.<sup>90</sup>

This shows that an individual is capable of regarding others first as neighbours and second as friends. *All* human beings must first be loved as the neighbour, but this does not exclude individuals from selecting some as friends. There is no contradiction in selecting neighbours to be friends as well as neighbours as long as the intrinsic worth of each individual is continuously respected. When an individual takes a neighbour and adds on friendship, an individual adds additional temporal value, but it does not mean that the original foundation is removed. In this way, Kierkegaard's inclusive criteria is fulfilled as everyone is respected as the neighbour at the same time that an individual's need for friendship and temporal benefit is satisfied as an additional layer can always be added.

Finally, preferential love needs to become abiding. One of Kierkegaard's major problems with preferential love as there is no way to ensure its perseverance. While neighbour love is everlasting no matter the circumstances, friendship can fade with time or with nonchalance. In order for this to be solved, the basis for the friendship must rest in neighbour love as “no change can take the neighbour.”<sup>91</sup> Therefore, if the relationship between two people is grounded in neighbour love, even if the additional layers of friendship fade away, the foundation will never cease. Neighbour love will always persevere and preferential love and neighbour love can co-exist as long as this is understood: neighbour love will always remain.

By introducing these conditions to preferential love, it is shown that friendship can be relieved

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89 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 146.

90 Walsh, 240.

91 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 65.

from despair and can be grounded in the same spiritual and ethical notions that contribute to the characteristics of neighbour love.

#### **IV. Kierkegaard's Friendship**

From the description and justification given throughout this chapter it can be seen that Kierkegaard is ultimately not an opponent of friendship. Rather, Kierkegaard believes that friendship is possible and is actually *needed* in order for individuals to live fulfilling lives. As this chapter has developed, a 'proper' friendship for Kierkegaard is one that is based in neighbour love with preferential friendship adding an additional temporal layer on top of the foundation.

A modern, Christian, example of Kierkegaard's ideal friendship is described perfectly in the institution of marriage. The traditional wedding vows state that love is founded in God and that only true love, love which is both given and accepted freely, will sustain a marriage. This love which is given and accepted freely is *neighbour* love. This means that marriage has made the love transcendent and inclusive by seeing the *neighbour* in the other first. Furthermore, marriage strives to make the love abiding, by stating that each will love and cherish the other no matter the circumstances: "in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer." These vows can be interpreted by Kierkegaard's thought to embody his ideal form of friendship: one which promises to love the person based on *God's* love, give love freely, without seeking advantages, and which promises to sustain that love no matter what circumstances arise. For Kierkegaard, this is an example of preferential friendship, as two individuals are choosing to spend their lives with each other over all others, which still is grounded in neighbour love, causing the couple to recognize each other as equals, as unique human beings before God, as neighbours who should be valued regardless of preference and to love them first as members of humanity. Marriage truly embodies Kierkegaard's idea of two distinct selves drawing together and

respecting each other for that distinctness.

Although marriage embodies Kierkegaard's ideal form of friendship within its vows, it does not make it the only example of Kierkegaard's friendship in modern society. Take the following example: a man and a woman sustain a romantic relationship for many years, but circumstances in both of their lives causes them to go separate ways and to bring the romantic relationship, the relationship which forms out of *preference*, to an end. Nevertheless, the two respect the decisions the other has made in order to further his or her own life and loves and respects the other regardless of their romantic relationship ending. The same can be said for friends that realize that despite their differences in personality, causing them to cease to associate and spend time together, they still wish each other well and hope for that the other receives and achieves the best in life. In both these cases, the individuals have shown that despite their preference for each other ending, they still love each other based on a "common humanity, as fellow human beings."<sup>92</sup> Despite preferential love ending, their love for each other as neighbours has been sustained.

These examples show two ways which Kierkegaard's ideal friendship can be embodied in modern society. Both show that preference, whether it is sustained or whether it ceases to exist, can be added on top of neighbour love, causing an individual to still be orientated towards the other, wish them well and for neighbour love to persevere.

## V. Conclusion

An either/or approach to love is not what Kierkegaard is championing. Kierkegaard believes that to deny Christians preferential friendship would be to deny a fundamental part of human existence:

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92 Walsh, 240.

Neither is it required of the Christian that he, in blind and unwise zeal, would go so far that he could no longer bear to read a poet- anymore than it is required of the Christian that he must not eat ordinary food with others or that he should live apart from other people ... No, but the Christian must understand everything differently than the non-Christian does, must be conscious that he knows how to make distinctions. A person would not be able to live exclusively at all times with the highest Christian conceptions any more than he could live only on the food at the Communion table.<sup>93</sup>

By this, Kierkegaard means that preferential friendship, natural inclinations and such 'temporal' pleasures are a part of human existence just as much as selfhood and a conception of God should be. They are necessary to a full life. For this reason, Kierkegaard does not endorse an either/or approach to love, but stresses that both temporal and spiritual features need to be remembered when participating in preferential love, meaning that God may *never* be forgotten and the friend must be first looked at as the neighbour. Therefore, the neighbour becomes the true focus of the relationship and preferential love is not eliminated but *transformed*.

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<sup>93</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 47.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusions- An Ethical Society**

As seen through this discussion of selfhood, despair, and the two forms of love, the more conscious an individual is of his capacity to be a self, and therefore the greater his conception of God, the more he comes to value others in his life and in society. Therefore, as seen through this critique of Kierkegaard's work, an increased conception of God can aid an individual in participating ethically in society. Primarily, this is because Kierkegaard describes an individual's relationship with God as a way of learning how to be a human being and how to act as one, a task which both *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Works of Love* undertake. Kierkegaard claims that an individual's understanding concerning how he ought to act as a human being creates different dynamics within society. Kierkegaard, throughout both primary works, writes a discourse which strives to instil an understanding in its readers that the correct way to act towards others is by having this inward relationship with God and acting towards others from a foundation of neighbour love, as established previously, which serves to care about the worth and dignity of every human being.

As described in the introduction, an 'ethical society' can be understood as a community of individuals who associate based on a mutual affirmation of the worth and dignity of every human being, and a concern for establishing relations between individuals which seek to affirm these beliefs. A society which operates 'ethically' in this case would be one where all individuals in society seek to relate to others and associate with others while preserving their own worth and dignity and the worth and dignity of others. For Kierkegaard, this is done through the inward relationship that the individual has established with God. A proper inward relationship with God, or *selfhood*, is key to operating as an ethical society.

Kierkegaard stresses that modern society takes on an increased ethical outlook when individuals in society feel they have responsibility to one another. This responsibility takes the form of recognizing

that all individuals are equal, as they are all grounded in God, and in the recognition that every action towards another person must be executed with regards to his place before God and with regard for his worth and dignity.<sup>94</sup> Kierkegaard stresses that when selfhood is established the individual and society gain numerous things which help establish them as ethical actors and as a part of an ethical society.

This responsibility, which allows individuals to become ethical actors, is instilled in individuals when they attain selfhood by two main things: recognition that all human beings are equal before God, and recognition that society is united by the idea of God. First, as developed in the second chapter of this work, selfhood allows an individual to recognize both his own image and the image of others through the eyes of God. When all individuals do this, it establishes a sense of respect amongst individuals in society. Individuals realize that they have ideals in common: individuals are all spiritual and temporal beings; they are all conscious of God and all have a spiritual connection with Him; they are all aware of their true nature through their relationship with God; etcetera. This understanding, which comes only through selfhood, means that all individuals are able to see everyone in society as worthy and are able to view them as neighbours, establishing neighbour love as a foundation for all further relationships. This alleviates the problems suffered by the 'crowd', which was described in the first chapter, as individuals are now concerned with each other rather than just with temporal comforts and individualism.

Second, individuals are able to relate to a common idea: God. As developed in the first chapter, the 'crowd' lacks any common idea through which to unite themselves. Kierkegaard stresses that the 'crowd' feels they only have a responsibility to themselves, whereas uniting a group of individuals over an external common idea- such as a great leader, a great individual, or God- allows individuals to relate to each other in a meaningful way and feel responsible for others. When an individual attains selfhood he become aware of the existence of God and of the effect God has on his life and on the lives of

<sup>94</sup> Graham M. Smith, "Responsibility to the Other," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 10 (2007): 182.

others. God becomes important in the lives of individuals and of society as there is a recognition that He is solely responsible for the existence of all individuals in society. This common idea creates a bond between societal members and creates a society where individuals feel more connected and similar, which contributes to an individual's want and need to care for the worth and dignity of his fellow societal members. This common idea, or bond, helps a society to feel increasingly like a unit, to become focused and helps society to define itself, allowing the society to pursue goals which are shaped and defined in a way that serves *all* society members.

These two things relieve the consequences and problems of the 'crowd'. Both the recognition that all human beings are equal before God and the recognition that society is bonded together by the idea of God are consequences of the attainment of selfhood, as by attaining selfhood individuals become conscious of their spiritual relationship with God and on the influence that God has upon them. The recognition of the profound importance that God has on relationships in society allows man to cease to be individualistic and to relate to others. It is this *relationship*– or the *ability* to relate to others– that creates an 'ethical' outlook to society. Whereas Kierkegaard argues that society devoid of conceptions of God is also devoid of ethics, a society that has attained selfhood, and therefore is conscious of God's existence and involvement in all capacities– all relationships– of all societal members's lives, is capable of ethical action.

Furthermore, as the second and third chapter of this work developed, selfhood creates an opportunity for individuals to see everyone under the guise of neighbour love. As neighbour love is the primary source of all forms of love, and is grounded entirely in God, this love serves as a foundation for all relationships and is attainable when selfhood has been established. As stressed in the previous chapters, when selfhood is attained, individuals conceive of God and recognize that they are equals with others. This serves as the basis for neighbour love. Neighbour love acts as the primary way in which a society becomes more ethical, as individuals are now concentrating on the *other* and not on

themselves, acting with concern for the worth and dignity of *others*. Additionally, when neighbour love is established it can serve as foundation of all other relationships. As discussed before, neighbour love transforms preferential love and allows for every relationship to be viewed and acted upon with the foundation of neighbour love, which contributes to the ethical nature of *every* relationship in society, as *every* relationship has now been turned into a God-relationship. God is a vital term— a middle term— in all relationships that may arise in society, keeping the worth and dignity of all human beings as the primary focus of these relationships.

Therefore, selfhood is vital to creating ethical relationships and vital to equipping individuals with the necessary values to participate ethically in society. An individual's inward relationship with God causes him to develop relationships built upon neighbour love, which, as discussed before, causes an individual to view and treat others as equals and completely unselfishly. This, if taken on by many in a society, allows for individuals to build relationships on equality and selflessness, orientating them to a societal outlook that is focused on the other and not the self. This act of creating a sense in each individual of equality with the other and a responsibility to preserve the worth and dignity of others, in an entirely selfless way, is what ultimately creates an ethical society.

Furthermore, the thought of Kierkegaard concerning despair, selfhood, love and friendship has profound implications for politics. As each individual becomes more self-conscious, more connected to God, and as each begins to act more ethically towards others, society is transformed. Society is now filled with individuals who not only relate share common ideals and virtues, but with individuals who understand that neighbour love should be an underlying theme in politics and societal interactions. As how an individual is acts in his personal relationships, will transcend to how he acts publicly, the more inclined an individual is to focus on others, rather than himself, in his private life, the more he will be inclined to do this publicly. Therefore, these inclinations towards neighbour love and friendship not only propels individuals to act ethically in their personal lives, but to orientate their interactions in the

political realm towards the ethical. This means that individuals will be encouraged to pursue situations of mutual benefit, as they see others as deserving of equal treatment.

Friendship, undercut with neighbour love, in politics means that the State adopts a stance where everyone's interests are valued the same: as every societal member has the same moral and spiritual value. Politics functions best when the moral practice of social inclusion— of treating everyone equally— serves as the basis of all action, as it results in a more just and increasingly more trusting society because everyone feels valued. These consequences embody how it is in the best interest of private relationships for individuals to treat everyone as neighbours, but it is also in the best interest of the State. This is because the State depends on ethical practices in order to promote justice, well-being and peaceful inhabitation. When an individual is orientated towards the other, individuals are more attached to each other, are able to live more harmoniously and begin to cultivate a more humane political life. The State, therefore, has a vested interest in promoting friendship in society and in orientating its own political action in the direction of the good of society as it creates a more peaceful society. This means that individuals— from government leaders, to policy-makers, to the average man— are increasingly likely to put the good of everyone first, act justly and work towards political solutions in the name of inclusion. Society is overwhelmingly benefited by selfhood and relationships which are grounded in neighbour love.

This investigation begun with the stated desire to show how selfhood can release an individual from despair and allow him to participate both in neighbour love and also in preferential love, contributing to an overall more ethical society and to more ethical politics. By describing how an individual escapes despair and forms a conception of God, and therefore human worth and dignity, it has been shown that an individual gains an understanding of neighbour love and is able to use this as a foundation for all other relationships, and therefore preferential love, both privately and publicly. Therefore, an individual's duty to his friends is important for a healthy and ethical friendship, but

friendship can not be understood as the limit of an individual's responsibility. An individual, and furthermore, all of society, has a duty to love the neighbour who is present in the friend, therefore needing to reconcile the two loves together. Regardless of the specific qualities found in a friend which make the relationship pleasurable, the individual is still required to love the friend first and foremost as a neighbour. It is in this deeply inward process of neighbour love that the value of each human being is found, revealed and sustained. This process and bridging of neighbour love and preferential friendship leads to a more ethical society as individuals, and furthermore the State, are focused on the infinite value of each human being. There can be little doubt that the conclusions reached in this thesis takes nothing away from friendship or neighbour love, but rather supplements them both, turning all relationships into God-relationships and allowing each relationship to remain ethical and focused on the other.

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