

Kierkegaard and the Greek World

Tome I: Socrates and Plato

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Symposium:

Kierkegaard and Platonic Eros

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I. The Theory of Eros in Plato's Dialogues: A Brief Synopsis and Commentary

To call something divine is to assert that it is a higher power, something not created by human beings and not within our control; we do not dispose of it, but it holds sway over us. For Plato, "any power, any force we see at work in the world, which is not born with us and will continue after we are gone could thus be called a god, and most of them were."¹ Clearly, one of the most prominent divinities in the Platonic universe is Eros, the god of love: this personified emotional force is mentioned repeatedly throughout Plato's collected works and is the theme to which two of his greatest dialogues are largely devoted. In the *Theages*, a short dialogue having to do with his divine sign, the character Socrates admits that love is one subject about which he does have knowledge; in the *Cratylus*, which deals with the meanings of words, Socrates says that Eros flows into us from the outside; and there are passages in the *Republic* and the *Laws* that focus on the place of erotic love in the ideal society.² But the primary sources for the Platonic discussion of Eros are two dialogues, the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*.

The *Symposium*, which is also known as the *Banquet* or the *Drinking-Party*, consists of a series of speeches made in praise of Eros, the god of love. The participants are Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, Agathon, Socrates, and Alcibiades; and one common theme shared by almost all of the speeches is that Eros plays an important role in guiding human beings toward the appropriate objects of love.³ The highlight of the dialogue, and the place where scholars tend

¹ G.M.A. Grube, *Plato's Thought*, Boston: Beacon Press 1958, p. 150.

² See *Theages* 128b, *Cratylus* 420a-b, *Republic* 457a-461e, and *Laws* 836b-842a. In *Symposium* 177d-e, Socrates again says that love is "the only thing he understands," as Kierkegaard points out in *The Concept of Irony*, see SKS 1, 86 / CI, 24.

³ As is pointed out by Catherine Osborne in *Eros Unveiled: Plato and the God of Love*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1994, p. 92: "Alcibiades needed a guide to lead him to his beloved.... Phaedrus begins by suggesting that Love is the principle that ought to guide men in all their affairs; Pausanias suggests that the proper sort of Love turns men to the correct sort of objects; Aristophanes, after describing the human quest for one's original 'other half,' assigns to Eros the role of guide, leading us to what is akin to ourselves; Agathon suggests that Eros guides his subjects to success in the arts and serves as the best pilot in all affairs and the best leader in life's choral dance." She cites *Symposium* 178c, 181a, 193b-d, and 197a-e.

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to look when searching for Plato's own doctrine of love, is the speech of Socrates, much of the content of which is attributed to a mysterious priestess named Diotima, whom Socrates characterizes as "the one who taught me the art of love."⁴ The speech suggests that Beauty and the Good are closely related, if not identical, and that they are the ultimate aims of all human activity.⁵ So Eros is not only the power that moves human beings with sexual desire in the most explicit sense,⁶ but it is also what inspires artistic creativity, moral improvement, and intellectual apprehension of eternal realities. On the Platonic view, erotic love is associated with everything from our carnal longings to the highest aspirations of the human soul, including our yearning for immortality.⁷ Eros is construed in the speech of Socrates/Diotima as a sort of intermediary between mortal and divine realms of being. We cannot long for what we already have, and so if Eros is conceived as a kind of appetite or desire to possess whatever is beautiful or good, then love itself cannot be personified as a perfect being who is already in possession of such qualities as goodness and beauty.⁸ Here, we see why Platonic Eros might be considered egocentric and acquisitive: *I* long for what is good *for me*, and *I* long to possess it for *myself*. "This violent sense of need is what Plato primarily means by love," one scholar writes, giving voice to a fairly common judgment.⁹ And there is reason to be concerned about what might be left out of the picture in the erotic ascent recommended in Diotima's narrative, in which a person leaves his or her particularity behind, rising from the love of one beautiful body to the love of all, from love of bodies to love of souls, from there to a love of customs and sciences, and then on to Beauty itself.¹⁰ Or, as Kierkegaard sums it up concisely in *The Concept of Irony*, "the object of love is: beautiful bodies—beautiful souls—beautiful observations—beautiful knowledge—the beautiful."¹¹ Beauty itself is said to be uncorrupted by human flesh or coloring or any of that other

⁴ *Symposium* 201d. The speech of Socrates, including the parts ascribed to Diotima, extends from 198a to 212c. See also *SKS* 20, 377, NB5:16 / *JP* 6, 6144; in this notebook entry from 1848, Kierkegaard remarks that Socrates "spoke of having learned from a woman," and adds, "I, too, can say that I owe my best to a girl. I did not learn it from her directly, but she was the occasion."

⁵ See *Symposium* 204e–206a.

⁶ Homoerotic love in particular; this, at least, is the main focus of the *Symposium*; Pausanias describes the love of boys as more "heavenly" than the love of women (see 181b–d), and in the speech of Socrates/Diotima, it is claimed that the goal of Eros is to reproduce (see 206b–e), whether in body or in soul. And the less bodily the reproduction, the better (208e–209e); what we tend to call "sublimation" is here interpreted as the expression of love that comes nearest to realizing its proper object.

⁷ See, for example, *Symposium*, 207d.

⁸ *Symposium*, 206a and 200a–e.

⁹ John Rist, *Eros and Psyche*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1964, p. 26. James Rhodes takes issue with this view, asking whether Eros can coherently be compared to an appetite which disappears when satisfied: if it is a desire for the good, then can we not have an abiding desire that whatever "gladdens our heart" be present to us, so that we love it even as we possess it? See his discussion in *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence: Plato's Erotic Dialogues*, Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press 2003, pp. 310–11.

¹⁰ *Symposium*, 209e–212a.

¹¹ *SKS* 1, 160 / *CI*, 107.

"mortal nonsense," and the person who has ascended to this level of abstraction will think less of the distinctive reality and value of contingent individuals, which are to be loved only in so far as they are instances of beauty, goodness, and other admirable qualities.¹² On this view, "beautiful individuals have only instrumental value: they are to be used, stepped on, like rungs of a ladder which leads away from any concern for them."¹³

It should be noted, of course, that the speech of Socrates is not the only one in the *Symposium*, nor does he get the last word: although it is questioned whether Alcibiades is too young to have developed sharp insight, he ends the dialogue with a final eulogy that points out what may be lacking in the contemplative self-sufficiency of the lover described in the previous speech.¹⁴ After stumbling in drunk amidst a general uproar, Alcibiades learns of the theme of the conversation so far and demands to deliver a panegyric of his own, in praise of Socrates. A key moment is when he states that, although Socrates has many good qualities, these may be shared by others as well.¹⁵ This makes us wonder if love of a person may be something more than a response to universal properties. Socrates is portrayed by Alcibiades as an exceptional, inhuman being, who is equally impervious to cold, fatigue, fear of bodily harm, or the sexual advances made by Alcibiades himself, who is madly infatuated with him. "I wonder if Socrates was that cold," Kierkegaard asks himself; "I wonder if it did not hurt him that Alcibiades could not understand him."¹⁶ The other speech deserving of special attention is given by Aristophanes, for whom Eros is the name for our desire for wholeness, our longing to unite with our "other half."¹⁷ Through a myth of how human beings came to exist in their present state of incompleteness and longing, Aristophanes claims that we were once whole but were cut in half by the gods, and now we search restlessly to unite with the beloved other with whom we can become whole again. Although this conception of romantic love as a merging with the other half of oneself does little to diminish the impression that Plato's account of Eros is egoistic, it does capture the feeling of lack that drives us in search of fulfillment, and it also undermines the notion of self-contained autonomy presented by Socrates. Together, the speeches of Aristophanes and Alcibiades provide strong counterpoints to the theory of Eros which is usually identified as Plato's own.

¹² *Symposium* 211e. It would be hard to argue that what is described in 211c is anything other than a flight from the particular toward the universal: on the first step of his ascent, the lover is described as progressing ἀπὸ ἐνός ἐπὶ δύο καὶ ἀπὸ δύο ἐπὶ πέντε τὰ καλὰ σώματα—that is, "from one to two and from two to all beautiful bodies."

¹³ Jonathan Lear, "Eros and Unknowing," in *Open Minded*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 1998, pp. 148–66; pp. 163–4.

¹⁴ *Symposium* 219a. Cf. Sophia Scopetea, *Kierkegaard og græciteten*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 1995, p. 325.

¹⁵ *Symposium*, 221c. For an excellent discussion of this speech and its dramatic function, see Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986, pp. 184–99.

¹⁶ *Pap. V B 4:3 / JP* 4, 4262. The speech of Alcibiades occupies more of Kierkegaard's attention in *The Concept of Irony* than any other part of the *Symposium*.

¹⁷ *Symposium* 189d–193e.

The *Phaedrus* poses its own set of challenges for the interpreter. It is a metaphorically suggestive text in which the topic of Eros arises in the midst of a conversation about oratory. At first, Socrates defines Eros as an irrational desire, but later he retracts what he has said so far as it is a kind of blasphemy and promises to make up for it with another speech in honor of love.¹⁸ This time, Eros is described as a variety of sacred frenzy, a heaven-sent blessing which provides us with insight.¹⁹ Prophecy and poetic inspiration are among the other types of sacred frenzy, all of which demonstrate that divine madness is superior to human sanity. As in the *Symposium*, the vision of earthly beauty serves as a precipitating factor, lifting the mind to the contemplation of higher things.²⁰ Unlike the *Symposium*, however, the *Phaedrus* does not view the individual beloved as a dispensable step on the way to illumination. Rather, it "begins and ends with the love-relationship between individuals," presenting the erotic bond to another person as precisely what guides the lover "to an understanding of beauty and truth."²¹ The madness of love has the ability to lift us to a more elevated level of happiness and wisdom than we ourselves could reach through the aid of merely human prudence or secular reason.²² Compared with the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus* provides the student of Plato with better resources for appreciating the significance of the most intensely particularized instances of passionate attachment. Yet the two dialogues are alike in their conviction that the experience of erotic longing which draws us toward what is beautiful has a crucial epistemic purpose: "As the most accessible of the Forms, visible in part even to the physical eye, Beauty opens up human awareness to the existence of the other Forms, drawing the philosopher toward the beatific vision and knowledge of the True and the Good. Hence Plato suggested that the highest philosophical vision is possible only to one with the temperament of a lover."²³

II. Kierkegaard and the Theory of Eros: An Overview and Interpretation

"I have now read so much by Plato on love," Kierkegaard says in a letter to his fiancée, and this turns out to be more than just a youthful enthusiasm: even his latest religious writings contain blatant allusions to Plato's erotic dialogues, the *Symposium* and

¹⁸ *Phaedrus*, 238b-c and 242d-243b.

¹⁹ See *Phaedrus*, 244a-245c.

²⁰ *Phaedrus*, 249d-250e. "That intellectual ascent has its origin in an erotic aesthetic experience is necessary due to the special nature of beauty. As a Form it belongs to the intelligible realm. But it is simultaneously the only Form that is also grasped by sensual knowledge.... The Form of Beauty abrogates the division between the visible and the intelligible." Friedo Ricken, *Philosophy of the Ancients*, trans. by Eric Watkins, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1991, p. 103.

²¹ Grube, *Plato's Thought*, pp. 112-13. See also Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, pp. 220-1.

²² *Phaedrus*, 255a-256e. Cf. Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, p. 473.

²³ Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, New York: Ballantine Books 1991, p. 41. See also G.R.F. Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato's Phaedrus*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987, pp. 140-2.

the *Phaedrus*.²⁴ And it is not without justification that one commentator describes even *Works of Love* as "a courageous effort to re-introduce eros into philosophy."²⁵ Although Platonic Eros is not Kierkegaard's ultimate interest, it would be false to say that it is not at all what his writings are concerned about. He speaks well of the *Symposium* for its "indescribably wonderful presentation" of love's ennobling influence, and of the *Phaedrus* for its "great picture" of "the madness of love."²⁶ And his own works do undeniably share with these Platonic dialogues an interest in the role of love in the development of the human being. Kierkegaard's main criticism of Platonic Eros is that it is not sufficiently a love of the individual. Writing about the progress of speeches in the *Symposium*, he observes that "Love is continually disengaged more and more from the accidental concretion in which it appeared"; the abstract reflection "mounts higher and higher above the atmospheric air until breathing almost stops in the pure ether of the abstract."²⁷ Unfortunately, this is what happens when love is defined as a yearning for the eternal which is only mistakenly directed at a specific finite "other." Kierkegaard insists upon the unique individuality of the person who is loved, as opposed to a flight toward "that great sea of beauty" and away from the love of the particular individual in his or her distinctive singularity.²⁸ As he argues in *Works of Love*, in order to love the actual people we see, it is first of all necessary to "give up all imaginary and exaggerated ideas about a dream world where the object of love should be sought and found."²⁹ In other words, we should not use the love of an individual merely as a stimulus for taking flight from concrete reality into a contemplation of more perfect and abstract objects.

The secret of earthly love is that it bears the imprint of divine love, Kierkegaard claims, and this idea of the beloved as the stimulus for the lover's spiritual ascent is plainly reminiscent of Plato's *Symposium*.³⁰ Yet, for Kierkegaard, the earthly love relationship is not merely a step on the way to the eternal, just as it is not justified in merely romantic or humanistic terms: rather, it is the sacred process by which contingent existence is infused with divinity. In *Works of Love* and elsewhere, he compares Socrates' remark about loving what is ugly to the Christian doctrine of loving the neighbor, and suggests that it is a selfish person who insists on loving only

²⁴ Letter to Regine Olsen, *B&A*, vol. 1, pp. 52-3 / *LD*, pp. 66-8, Letter 21. Kierkegaard alludes to *Phaedrus*, 229d-230a and *Symposium*, 220c-d, respectively, in *The Book on Adler* (*Pap.* VII-2 B 235, 226 / *BA*, 139) and *For Self-Examination* (*SKS* 13, 39 / *FSE*, 9).

²⁵ Eisebet Jørgstrup, "Text and the Performative Act," *Philosophy Today*, vol. 45, 2001, pp. 121-31; see p. 124.

²⁶ *SKS* 19, 195, No16:12 / *JP* 3, 2387. *Pap.* III B 26 / *JP* 3, 3323.

²⁷ *SKS* 1, 106-7 / *CI*, 45. *SKS* 1, 102 / *CI*, 41.

²⁸ *Symposium*, 219d. The portrait of the lover's soul in the speech of Socrates "is a totally empty abstraction," Kierkegaard writes; in the *Phaedrus*, the soul is "understood just as abstractly as the pure essence of the things that are the object of its activity." *SKS* 1, 127 / *CI*, 68.

²⁹ *SKS* 9, 162 / *WL*, 161.

³⁰ *SKS* 5, 84 / *EUD*, 75. See also *SKS* 4, 33 / *R*, 185: "From a religious point of view, one could say it is as if God used this girl to capture him, and yet the girl herself is not an actuality but is like the lace-winged fly with which a hook is baited." Cf. Plato, *Symposium* 210a-211c.

what is “objectively” lovable.³¹ In the “Young Man” of his own *Symposium*—the dialogue on love at the beginning of *Stages on Life’s Way*—he presents us with a figure who believes that the category of “the lovable” is untrustworthy if it has no abstract rational essence that compels agreement from anyone and everyone.³² This character’s attitude toward Eros is that, “if I cannot understand the force to whose power I am surrendering, then I will not surrender to its power.”³³ Falling in love is not a self-initiated voluntary act, of course, but “the person who from the beginning resolutely takes his stand against actuality will always have the power to drive off the inspiration of erotic love or to slay it at birth.”³⁴ The “Young Man” in the first part of *Stages on Life’s Way* should therefore be able to avoid the danger of erotic love, for better or worse, since he claims to fear it and is obviously on guard against its influence.³⁵

Apart from his fairly straightforward discussion of Plato’s dialogues in *The Concept of Irony*, of which the most relevant portions have already been cited, Kierkegaard treats Platonic Eros most extensively in *Stages on Life’s Way*. From the moment when Constantin Constantius proposes that those assembled give a series of speeches about erotic love, the first part of *Stages* (“In Vino Veritas”) is basically a revised adaptation of Plato’s *Symposium*.³⁶ The “Young Man,” at one point, justifies his aversion toward Eros by appealing to the speech of Aristophanes, who finds it ludicrous that “in the obsession of love, [the human being] is only a half running around after his other half.”³⁷ The second part of *Stages on Life’s Way* opens with an analysis of Eros in relation to marriage,³⁸ and the author of the third part observes in one of his diary entries that it is not with Eros that he is struggling, but with the “religious crises that are gathering over me.”³⁹ Johannes Climacus quotes from the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* in *Philosophical Fragments*, but in neither case does his reference pertain directly to the theory of Eros.⁴⁰ More to the point is his mention

³¹ SKS 9, 364–7 / WL, 371–3. See also SKS 20, 173, NB2:77 / JP 1, 942. The passage he has in mind is *Symposium* 210b–c, where Socrates/Diotima says of the person starting out on the ascent of love that, upon realizing that beauty of souls is greater than bodily beauty, he must love someone who shows signs of spiritual beauty, even when this is housed in an unattractive body. As Nussbaum points out, the person who says “I’ll love you only to the extent that you exemplify qualities that I otherwise cherish” leaves no room for unconditional love. See Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001, p. 499.

³² SKS 6, 39–44 / SLW, 34–40.

³³ SKS 6, 44 / SLW, 40.

³⁴ SKS 6, 165 / SLW, 176.

³⁵ See SKS 6, 42–3 / SLW, 37–8. Cf. SKS 6, 37–8 / SLW, 32. For a good account of Eros and its relation to the aesthetic in *Stages on Life’s Way* and other texts, see Chantal Anne, *L’Amour dans la pensée de Søren Kierkegaard*, Paris: L’Harmattan 1993, pp. 65–73.

³⁶ SKS 6, 36 / SLW, 30–1.

³⁷ SKS 6, 46 / SLW, 43. Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 189d–193b.

³⁸ SKS 6, 95–7 / SLW, 99–101.

³⁹ SKS 6, 203 / SLW, 216.

⁴⁰ SKS 4, 238–9 / PF, 31. SKS 4, 245 / PF, 39. The passages cited are from *Symposium*, 209c–210d and *Phaedrus* 230a, respectively.

in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* of “the Greek conception of Eros as found in the *Symposium*,” with the accompanying suggestion that the existing thinker is in a state of want and striving.⁴¹ After all, in Plato’s *Symposium* it is revealed that Eros is midway between wisdom and ignorance, and is therefore akin to the philosopher, whose love of wisdom depends on his awareness of (and lack of satisfaction with) his present state of ignorance.⁴² And in *Works of Love*, in the chapter entitled “Love Hides a Multitude of Sins,” Kierkegaard appropriates the term “divine madness” to refer to the capability “to be lovingly unable to see the evil that takes place right in front of one.”⁴³

Because he considers it “a sad but all too common inversion to go on talking continually about how the object of love must be so that it can be lovable,”⁴⁴ Kierkegaard might be seen as an advocate of ἀγάπη as opposed to ἔρως. And it is true that he distinguishes a right way of loving, which is difficult to achieve, from a wrong way, which is closer to our natural tendencies. But Kierkegaard is far from the neo-Manichaean view introduced by Anders Nygren, according to which the two forms of love are incompatible and engaged in “a life-and-death struggle.”⁴⁵ He is much closer to Thomas Aquinas, for whom Eros is highly valued, since it inspires a striving for perfection.⁴⁶ Like the Greek authors, Kierkegaard uses multiple words to refer to love: The Danish *Elskov* and *Kjærlighed* could be roughly aligned with ἔρως and ἀγάπη, since *Elskov* indicates a love between two human beings and *Kjærlighed* tends to have broader connotations (which do not exclude intense, personal affections).⁴⁷ The latter term is used by Kierkegaard to indicate an unselfish,

⁴¹ See SKS 7, 91 / CUP1, 92. SKS 7, 117–18 / CUP1, 121.

⁴² *Symposium*, 204a. Cf. Thomas Gould, *Platonic Love*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1963, p. 44: “As philosophy is not simple ignorance, but the awareness of the desirability of knowledge, so love is not merely the absence of all good things, it is the awareness of what they are, that they are absent and that they would indeed be desirable. Really to understand one’s ignorance and what that implies is thus to understand love.”

⁴³ SKS 9, 285 / WL, 287. Cf. *Phaedrus*, 244b–e. “Johannes Climacus” alludes to the same Platonic notion in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, see SKS 7, 143 / CUP1, 137–8.

⁴⁴ SKS 9, 159 / WL, 159.

⁴⁵ Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. by Philip S. Watson, New York: Harper and Row 1969, p. 6. Replying to Nygren, Vlastos writes that the “Greeks, being human, were capable of genuine, non-egoistic, affection as we are.” See “The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato,” p. 6.

⁴⁶ See the discussion by E. C. Vacek, SJ, in *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics*, Washington: Georgetown University Press 1994, pp. 244–7. On Kierkegaard’s belief that “sincere erotic love” can be “an upbringing toward goodness,” see Kristen Nordentoft, “Erotic Love,” in *Kierkegaard and Human Values*, ed. by Niels Thulstrup and Marie Mikulová Thulstrup, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 1980 (*Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana*, vol. 7), pp. 87–99, see p. 98.

⁴⁷ In notes to *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions* and to *Christian Discourses*, the Hongs draw this parallel between *Elskov* and *Kjærlighed* and ἔρως and ἀγάπη (TD, 10, 161 and CD, 17, 444). Unfortunately, their translations often misrepresent the distinction, impertinently rendering *Elskov* as “erotic love” (as if it always meant something lewd or profane) although in many cases the single inclusive term “love” would be a more accurate translation—for example, “If you yourself have never been in love, you do not know whether

neighborly love; the former has more of a romantic tone. But these different shades of meaning do not amount to a technical separation of the two terms: Kierkegaard uses *Kjærlighed* in reference to a Platonic speech in praise of Eros, and *Elskov* even in discussing Christian love of neighbor.⁴⁸ This suggests that Kierkegaard uses the different words for love in order to distinguish various aspects or manifestations of love, not to demarcate absolutely dissimilar categories which can only be locked in violent conflict.

Kierkegaard aligns himself with the speech of Socrates in the *Phaedrus* which praises the value of sacred madness.⁴⁹ In *The Concept of Irony*, he uses the word *Kjærlighed* repeatedly in reference to Plato's *Symposium*,⁵⁰ and in *Works of Love* he cites Socrates—that “simple wise man of old”—to the effect that “Love is a son of wealth and poverty,” translating the Greek ἔρως (“erotic love,” as his English translators would have it), with the Danish *Kjærlighed* that he uses to refer to Christian love.⁵¹ One of his religious discourses from 1843 contains the statement that “all human beings in all ages have confessed that love has its home in heaven and comes down from above,” which could be taken as an allusion to the *Phaedrus*.⁵² Even the decisively non-pagan Judge William appears to endorse the classical reverence toward Eros, which he praises as “a wonder.”⁵³ Again and again, Kierkegaard insists that diverse forms of love can be traced to a common origin, so that Christian love does not need to abolish drives and inclinations but only to refine these crude expressions of the one “fundamental universal love” into a more unselfish kind.⁵⁴ His reason for paying attention to the “Greek form of erotic love,” as Nordentoft remarks, is to emphasize that “love may take a variety of forms.”⁵⁵ As Kierkegaard argues in *Works of Love*, our aim should be to distinguish unselfish love from its deviant forms. Erotic love and friendship are not “the truest form of

anyone has ever been loved in the world, although you do know how many have affirmed that they have loved, have affirmed that they have sacrificed their lives for erotic love [*Elskov*].” In this passage from *Christian Discourses* (SKS 10, 244 / CD, 237), the Hongs give the misleading impression that Kierkegaard suddenly changes the subject, when in fact he has been using the verb *elske* all along. He does not mean to single out Eros as *opposed* to other kinds of love at any point in this sentence, just as he does not intend to instigate an orgy by declaring “Du skal elske” [you shall love] throughout *Works of Love*: see, for example, SKS 9, 25–50 / WL, 17–43.

⁴⁸ See *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions* (SKS 5, 423 / TD, 47), where Kierkegaard alludes to *Symposium*, 178b. In *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard uses the word *Kjærlighed* continually in reference to the same Platonic dialogue (SKS 1, 101–4 / CI, 41–52). See also SKS 3, 40 / EO2, 32 and SKS 9, 115–17 / WL, 112–14.

⁴⁹ See Pap. III B 3 / CI, Supplement, p. 441. Cf. *Phaedrus*, 244a.

⁵⁰ SKS 1, 101–14 / CI, 41–52.

⁵¹ SKS 9, 175 / WL, 175. Here, Kierkegaard is quoting from *Symposium*, 203c.

⁵² SKS 5, 158 / EUD, 157. Cf. *Phaedrus*, 250b–251e.

⁵³ See SKS 6, 116 / SLW, 121.

⁵⁴ SKS 9, 141–5 / WL, 139–43. In the opening chapter of *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard declares that love “flows” from a single hidden source “along many paths”; the varieties of “love in its manifestations” are to be the theme of his treatise: SKS 9, 17 / WL, 9.

⁵⁵ Nordentoft, “Erotic Love,” p. 92.

love,” and it is crucial to identify the ways in which they fall short of the ideal.⁵⁶ Most notably, Kierkegaard’s worries about the forms of love known to pagan culture include the idea that they tend to be selfish and possessive, preferential and exclusive, or preoccupied with making the judgment of whether or not the beloved has qualities which are independently admirable. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to speak as if there were an absolute ontological difference between the love that Kierkegaard discusses in his religious writings and the love that is the topic of Plato’s erotic dialogues, as if human beings were subject to a fundamentally Manichaean duality of motives, one good and the other evil.

In her book *Eros Unveiled*, Catherine Osborne points out that the phrase “God is love,” in the Greek New Testament, “does not so obviously imply that God is loving”; and she adds that early Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Origen often “take it in a different sense, namely to refer to God as the source or origin from which all other lovers derive their love.”⁵⁷ It is clear that Kierkegaard is operating with a similar conception of love, which he describes as the enigmatic power at the base of the psyche, and as the deepest ground of human existence. This, he says, is the explanation that we crave in our inner being, which explains the meaning of life “in the God who holds everything together in his eternal wisdom.”⁵⁸ This God of infinite wisdom is also the “source of all love” in such a way that, as emotional beings, we are what we are only by virtue of being *in* love.⁵⁹ Love is the “passion of the emotions” that connects the one who loves with the second-person beloved, thereby constituting the middle term in the relation.⁶⁰ On Kierkegaard’s trinitarian view, “The love-relationship requires threeness: the lover, the beloved, the love—but the love is God.”⁶¹ As M. Jamie Ferreira explains, “God is not the ‘middle term’ by being the direct object of our love in such a way as to marginalize the beloved; God is the ‘middle term’ by being the center of the relationship because ‘the love is God.’”⁶² Love, in other words, is the sacred power that connects us to the external world in which our duty is to love the person we see. There may be nothing in classical Greek thought that resembles Kierkegaard’s ideal of an unconditional love

⁵⁶ See SKS 9, 15 / WL, 7 and SKS 9, 263–6 / WL, 264–7.

⁵⁷ Osborne, *Eros Unveiled*, pp. 41–2. She is referring to 1 Jn 4:8, in which it is said that “anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.”

⁵⁸ SKS 5, 94 / EUD, 87. “God is infinite wisdom,” Kierkegaard writes in another discourse, and then (one sentence later): “God is love.” See SKS 11, 157 / WA, 11. Cf. *Symposium* 202e, in which Eros is described as an intermediary between the human and the divine realms, binding the whole together. Sigmund Freud, identifying “the libido of psychoanalysis” with “the ‘Eros’ of the philosopher Plato,” says that Eros is the power that “holds together everything in the world.” *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. by James Strachey, New York: Norton 1959, pp. 31–2.

⁵⁹ See SKS 9, 12 / WL, 3. See also Nordentoft’s remarks on the differentiation of self and world out of an oceanic unity as a “subject-constituting separation,” in which certain objects are charged with significance: “Erotic Love,” pp. 90–1.

⁶⁰ SKS 9, 116 / WL, 112.

⁶¹ SKS 9, 124 / WL, 121.

⁶² Jamie Ferreira, *Love’s Grateful Striving*, New York: Oxford University Press 2001, p. 72.

which asks for nothing in return; but this difference should not prevent us from appreciating the degree to which Kierkegaard was inspired in his own writings by the Platonic account of Eros, the god of love. Our need to love and be loved, for Kierkegaard no less than for Plato, is the condition of our dignity as the expression of something greater than ourselves.