

Kierkegaard on Self and Society

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One finds in Kierkegaard's later literature (1846–55) a continuation of his earlier emphasis in the pseudonymous writings on ethics as the search for self-knowledge. This socratic principle is clearly a present and unifying theme in the pseudonymous literature, and Kierkegaard does not lose sight of this philosophical commitment in these later works. Here he continues to stress the search for self-knowledge as a subjective passion which receives its most exemplary expression in the ethico-religious form of life. But this second literature significantly deepens Kierkegaard's preoccupation with self-knowledge by disclosing self-love as its essential motivation and the socio-political context in which all self-love and self-knowledge take form.

Before looking more closely at the way in which this second literature expands the view of ethics developed in the pseudonymous works, it would be useful to remind ourselves of Kierkegaard's three stages of human existence. The pseudonymous works developed a conception of human existence as composed of the aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages of life. The aesthetic stage is characterized by the desire for pleasure, the ethical by the obligation to become morally good, and the religious by the faith that one can with God's help fulfill one's moral obligation. The pseudonyms, who themselves are developed personalities, admirably portray the formal relations between pleasure, duty, and faith. They also succeed in existentially presenting these relations in a series of characters who are seized by dread and despair in their struggles to come to terms with the subjective dimension of the human self. Few philosophers in the history of western thought who have thoroughly as has Kierkegaard penetrated and exposed the complex terrain of human inwardness. Moreover, Kierkegaard has through his pseudonyms illuminated not only the texture of human inwardness but also its irreducibility. That is to say, the desire for pleasure, the demands of duty, and the promise of faith are ontologically constitutive of each individual subject, and the reconciling of these desires, obligations, and hopes is a task which each individual alone must

accomplish. This self, and the existential task which it poses are inescapably mine and mine alone. It is in this sense that Kierkegaard called attention to the irreducibility of the human *qua* individual, and the virtue of this achievement is its recognition of the character of human self.

But this conception of the human self developed by the pseudonyms is deficient in at least respects. First, they pay no attention to the ontological and the epistemological roles played by the other in the development of a concept of the self. The other is included neither in Kierkegaard's ontological analysis of the nature of the self nor in his analysis of the way in which individuals come to the knowledge of who and what they are. After having read the pseudonymous writings, one is left with the impression that the human other is not a necessary condition for either the existence of the self or for self-knowledge. This omission lends an abstract quality to Kierkegaard's conception of the self and leads to the charge that he had an atomistic view of the human self of the sort found in liberalism. The second deficiency in the pseudonymous literature is its lack of emphasis on the material conditions constituting the human self. Kierkegaard notes in *Either/Or* that the self is constituted by social, historical, economic, cultural, as well as biological and psychological factors, but it is an insight which he himself did not develop in these early writings. Moreover, these earlier works pay little attention to the social and political developments of his own Denmark in the nineteenth century. This neglecting of the material conditions constituting the human self and the social and political events occurring in his own life along with his failure to include the other in his ontology of the human self led some critics of the pseudonyms to conclude that Kierkegaard was an eccentric and isolated genius who was content to write for an equally isolated and, indeed, abstract individual who is exclusively concerned with his own private destiny. If left with only these early materials, the critic might well argue that Kierkegaard's irreducible inwardness is merely the psychological side of the alienated consciousness produced by the liberalism of modern social and political thought.

Kierkegaard anticipated this sort of criticism. In a journal entry in which he comments on the publication of his *Edifying Discourses*, which accompanied the publication of his pseudonymous books, Kierkegaard wrote that his critics »will presumably bawl out that I do not know what comes next, that I know nothing about sociality. The fools! Yet on the other hand I owe it to myself to confess before God that in a certain sense there is some truth in it, only not

as men understand it, namely that always when I have first presented one aspect sharply and clearly, then I affirm the validity of the other even more strongly. Now I have the theme of the next book. It will be called *Works of Love*.¹ Here is Kierkegaard up to his dialectical mischief again. The concern with the individual leads dialectically to an equally strong concern for the social. The transition may not be as dialectically neat as Kierkegaard hints that it will be, but it is a clear and unmistakable move none the less. Not only *Works of Love* but also all of the second literature is concerned with precisely these deficiencies plaguing the pseudonymous literature. In this later literature, Kierkegaard's ontology of the human self does take in a social dimension as does his epistemology. The self neither can exist nor know itself without the other. Thus, Kierkegaard's struggle to come to terms with the nature of the human self continues in this later literature, though now the development of his thought is significantly informed by both the social and historical dimensions of human life.

Now if Kierkegaard broadens his conception of the human self and the quest for self-knowledge by placing both in a socio-historical context, he also broadens it by introducing self-love as the essential motivation of self-knowledge. Self-love and self-knowledge are essentially related in the sense that the former is a necessary condition of the latter. Self-love is the desire to become a concrete, identifiable, and worthy self, and the satisfaction of this desire requires a social and historical context. One cannot become a self independently of the other and of history. Indeed, human relations on both a private and a public scale and historical movements are most clearly understood, Kierkegaard will argue, when they are construed in terms of the human self and its development toward concretion, identifiability, and a sense of worth. This desire, as we shall see, is similar to the desire for pleasure which is so thoroughly analyzed in the pseudonymous works as the heart of the aesthetic mode of existence. The ethical and religious task of life is portrayed not as transcending this desire but as mediating it by disclosing the necessarily moral and religious character of the desire's satisfaction. In the later literature, the ethico-religious task is the same. How is self-love, or the desire to become a concrete, identifiable, and worthy self, to be ethically and religiously

1 *Søren Kierkegaard's Papirer*, ed. P. A. Heiberg, V. Kuhr, and E. Torsting, 20 Vols., I-XI₃ (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1909-1948), VIII¹ A₄.

mediated? In confronting this question, Kierkegaard accepts the unsurpassability of self-love. One cannot not love oneself. He also recognizes the impossibility of loving oneself without directly implicating others. What Kierkegaard seems to have discovered in these later works is a social conception of human being based on the phenomenon of love. All human beings love themselves, and it is this self-love which casts us into relations with others. For without the other it is not possible to love oneself. The inescapability of self-love and the other as its necessary condition are the grounds for both selfish and unselfish self-love. Self-love is like pleasure. When pleasure is left to itself, it culminates in its own contradiction. The pseudonymous writers were anxious to convince their readers that the pursuit of pleasure which is unmediated by the ethico-religious mode of consciousness contradicts itself by culminating in despair. Now Kierkegaard will try to convince his reader that self-love, which is not mediated by an ethico-religious modes of consciousness, will culminate in selfishness. And a selfish self-love is a contradiction in the sense that one who selfishly loves himself can never actually become the concrete, identifiable, and worthy self which he desires to become. Selfish self-love is self-defeating, because it legislates the existence of a world characterized by conflict, manipulation and envy. And to exist in such a world is to exist in a manner which contradicts the natural end (*telos*) of self-love. Kierkegaard follows Kant in arguing that only when one wills all selves as ends is it possible for one to become the self one desires to become. Proper self-love is a love for all as one loves oneself, and it is only in this manner that the natural end of self-love can ever be actualized. The transformation of selfish self-love by the recognition of one's moral obligations and religious hopes is the only way in which the natural *telos* of self-love can ever be actualized. Kierkegaard's transition to the social and the historical in this second literature, then, places aesthetic desire, moral obligation, and religious faith in a living and concrete situation. Yes, it is true to say that these are the irreducible dimensions of the human self. But one must also say that the self always desires something particular, is always obligated to will specific and concrete ends, and also hopes for the realization of those same ends. Thus, Kierkegaard places his conception of the dialectical development of selfhood in a concrete social and historical situation which makes concrete and specific human desires, obligation, and hope.

In this paper, we shall examine Kierkegaard's conception of selfish self-

love. This analysis will lead us to a consideration of both its private and public forms as well as to an exploration of the psychology generated by selfish self-love. We shall be compelled by a consideration of time to stop short of a discussion of Kierkegaard's ethico-religious solution to the problem of selfish self-love. Such an investigation must be taken up at another time.

The Natural Self

In Kierkegaard's discussion of the human situation in his second literature one of the terms most frequently used to describe human beings is "natural man". This term consistently appears in most of the important published works during this period as well as in his journal.² One finds in most of these references to the "natural man" the notion of human beings state as selfish. Kierkegaard believes that "natural qualifications" like human "drives and inclinations" are always selfish.³ Indeed "naturally, there is nothing a man clings to so tight as to his selfishness – which he clings to with his whole self."⁴ This passage correctly reflects Kierkegaard's suspicion that there is little if anything undertaken by the natural man which is not tainted by the perversity of selfishness. Kierkegaard, like Aristotle, whom he follows closely on this point, relates the problem of selfishness to the issue of self-love.⁵ The natural self is one "who loves himself selfishly"⁶ and Kierkegaard would

2 Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon 'Christendom'*, trans. with an intro. by Walter Lowrie (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1944), pp. 122, 128, 150, 158.

Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, trans. with an intro. by Walter Lowrie (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp. 179 f.

Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself*, trans. with an intro. and notes by Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 113–15, 119, 121.

Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 4 Vols., (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967–75), I, 330, 507; II, 1823, 1943; III, 2902, 2908, 2919, 2970, 3031, 3224, 3317, 3681, 3779; IV, 4349, 4360, 4690, 4711, 4798, 4885, 5031.

3 *SKJP*, IV, 4447.

4 *FSE*, p. 97. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

5 Kierkegaard approvingly refers to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, IX, 7 and IX, 9 in his discussion of selfishness. Though he does not mention NE, IX, 8, it is obvious that he depends upon this chapter as well in his analysis of selfish self-love in *SKJP*, III, 2441. Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, trans. W. D. Ross in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. with an intro. by Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941).

6 *TC*, p. 119.

agree with Aristotle that such persons are those who “assign to themselves the greater share of wealth, honours, and bodily pleasures . . . [and] gratify their appetities and in general their feelings and the irrational element of the soul. . . .”⁷ But for Kierkegaard an equally serious form of selfish self-love is rooted not in greed, as these passages suggest, but in power. The more perverse form of selfish self-love is that love which appears or masquerades as love for another but is in reality the overpowering of this other for one’s own ends. Kierkegaard asserts that “what we men extol under the name of love is selfishness. . . .”⁸ Natural qualifications like “human drives” and “inclinations” are directed not only at the possession of physical and social objects such as food, shelter, money and fame but also, and more fundamentally when disguised as genuine love, at the possession of other persons.

Kierkegaard claims an allegiance to Aristotle in his observation that most expressions of love are, in fact, expressions of selfish self-love.⁹ And he relies heavily on Aristotle in accounting for how such a phenomenon is possible. In the *NE*, Aristotle argues that craftsmen and poets love their handiwork and poems more than they would love their producers if they were to come alive.¹⁰ This is true also of benefactors who love those whom they have helped more than the benefitted love their benefactors. “The cause of this,” explains Aristotle, “is that existence is to all men a thing to be chosen and lived, and that we exist by virtue of activity (i. e., by living and acting), and that the handiwork *is* in a sense, the producer in activity; he loves his handiwork, therefore, because he loves existence. And this is rooted in the nature of things; for what he is in potentiality, his handiwork manifests in activity.”¹¹ Aristotle here argues that the actualization of oneself in the object of one’s activity is pleasant.¹² Furthermore, he claims that “love is an activity”¹³ so that an object of love is loved because it represents the lover as actualized. It is therefore improper to draw a sharp ontological distinction between the

7 *NE*, IX, 8.

8 *FSE*, p. 102. Cf. “For love precisely is one of the strongest and deepest expressions of selfishness.” *Ibid.*, p. 97.

9 *SKJP*, III, 2441.

10 *NE*, IX, 7.

11 *NE*, IX, 7. Aristotle’s italics.

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*

actor and the acted upon, the producer and the product, the lover and the beloved.¹⁴

Kierkegaard sees in Aristotle's observations about some forms of love a principle governing the behavior of the natural man. Love within nature is a mode of self-production through which each individual attempts to pass from a state of potentiality to one of actuality by creating himself and in through the other. In Kierkegaard's words, "To be specific, he who has produced something loves it more than the production loves him. Why is this? Because there is more 'being', more egotism, in the first relationship than in the second, because author-love is the highest egotism. . . . This whole chapter by Aristotle is very valuable."¹⁵ The chapter is obviously a valuable one for Kierkegaard, although he draws an inference from its content which it is not clear that Aristotle would draw. Aristotle says that "activity" is pleasureable, but Kierkegaard claims that the activity is also selfishness.¹⁶ Kierkegaard believes that "activity" is selfish because "what is sought is not the other's good, or not that alone,"¹⁷ but essentially one's own transition from possibility to actuality through action upon another. The self becomes an actual and concrete being through its actions. Kierkegaard agrees with Aristotle that the self's handiwork is the "producer in activity". It is mistaken to distinguish ontologically the subject and the object acted upon by the subject. Now Kierkegaard extends this principle into the domain of human relationships in order to show that such relationships, when grounded in nature, are expressions of selfish self-love (egotism). The self is a being which is in the process of becoming and in the realm of nature one finds that this becoming self exploits other selves in its quest to be. This struggle to become a self within nature occurs in both the private and public spheres of human life. The natural man's egotism is as operative in the public and political dimensions of human life as it is in the private.¹⁸

14 *Ibid.*

15 *SKJP*, III, 2441.

16 Aristotle discusses selfish self-love in *NE*, IX, 8 and there relates it to greed.

17 *FSE*, p. 103.

18 The distinction between private and public is here loosely drawn to designate relations between individuals as opposed to relations between groups of individuals. It is recognized that public as well as private relations in the above sense may be political since both involve power, but in this paper, I shall confine the use of the term "political" to discussions of relations among groups of individuals.

The Natural Self in Private Relations

One finds Kierkegaard's discussion of egotism in the private sphere of life most thoroughly developed in *Works of Love*. In *Works of Love* and elsewhere, Kierkegaard identifies a number of concrete relations between individuals as expressions of egotism. The list of examples includes maternal love,¹⁹ relations based on admiration,²⁰ ownership of property,²¹ marriage,²² sacrificial love,²³ paternal love,²⁴ the religious relation between God and the individual,²⁵ sexual relations (eros),²⁶ and friendship.²⁷ Only eros and friendship however receive extended analysis in *Works of Love*, although it is clear that the arguments against eros and friendship as modes of egotism apply equally to the other members of this list. Indeed, it is clear that for Kierkegaard all private relations, whatever their forms, are subject to the contagion of egotism. The analysis, then, of friendship and eros must be considered merely as an illustration of the egotism obtained in all natural relations between individuals.

Now in discussing both these forms of love in *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard resorts to a conceptual framework which he has already used in earlier works to illuminate the nature of self-consciousness, freedom, anxiety, and despair. Kierkegaard writes that "in erotic love the I is qualified as body – psyche – spirit, the beloved qualified as body – psyche – spirit. In friendship the I is qualified as psyche – spirit and the friend is qualified as psyche – spirit. Only in love to one's neighbour is the self, which loves, spiritually qualified simply as spirit and his neighbour as purely spiritual."²⁸ Without here getting into a long discussion about the meaning of these terms in Kierkegaard's writings, it is sufficient to say that human relations which are not essentially spiritual in nature but are instead essentially sensuous or physical are relations which

19 *SKJP*, III, 2412, 2425.

20 *Ibid.*, I, 974.

21 Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1962), pp. 248 ff.

22 *SKJP*, III, 2412.

23 *Ibid.*

24 *Ibid.*

25 *AC*, pp. 150, 191, 221 f.

26 *WL*, *passim*.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Those familiar with Kierkegaard's earlier works will recognize these three terms as the one he uses in the development of his concept of the self.

are grounded in what Kierkegaard calls "natural determinants (tendencies and characteristics)."²⁹ Eros and friendship are by definition naturally determined and when the individual does not exist as spirit, they are only modes of immediacy. As such, both are spontaneous, preferential, and accidental in nature. Their spontaneous character results from their existing prior to that mode of reflection which leads to self-consciousness. That is to say, individuals whose responses of love to others are essentially spontaneous are motivated in part by impulses of which they are not conscious, and as such they are both unaware and uncritical of the impulses and the behavior they motivate. Neither requires reflection in this sense as a necessary condition for existing. Eros and friendship are accidental in the sense that they are in part "determined by the object."³⁰ Certain features and qualities of the other are in part determinative of eros and friendship. Clearly, erotic and friendly affections are partially stimulated by the other. It is also the case that the lover and friend prefer³¹ certain features and qualities to others so that the beloved and the befriended are preferred to the exclusion of others. The very nature of these modes of loving include, then, spontaneity, exclusivity,³² and preferentiality. It is in this sense that both are by nature modes of immediacy. The immediate individual is one who is not self-reflective and as such exists in relations which are by definition spontaneous, exclusive, and preferential. When one allows these qualities to govern one's social relations, they become essentially immediate in nature.

Kierkegaard observes throughout *Works of Love* that these immediate social relations have been praised by poets and philosophers as the epitome of goodness and fulfillment in human relations, although he does in the least share their enthusiasm; for, in his view, eros and friendship as immediate phenomena are nothing more than disguised forms of selfish self-love. "Self-love, egocentricity, is sensuality."³³ "In [erotic] love and friendship one's neighbour is not loved but one's self, or the first I once again, but more in-

29 *WL*, p. 68. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 77. Cf. *SKJP*, III, 2449.

31 Kierkegaard writes that "erotic love and friendship are preferential and the passion of preference." *WL*, p. 65.

32 *WL*, pp. 62 ff.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

tensely.”³⁴ And, finally, in eros and friendship, self-love “selfishly . . . unite[s] the two in a new selfish self.”³⁵

This selfish self-love is not simple greed or a crude narcissistic infatuation with one’s own body and feelings but is dialectically conceived as the narcissistic infatuation with the other in whom one sees oneself. Thus, “the one whom self-love in the strictest sense loves is also basically the other-I, for the other-I is oneself, and this is indeed self-love.”³⁶ For Kierkegaard, eros and friendship are trapped in this pessimistic scenario of self-seeking. Even the commitment of “devotion” and the feeling of “boundless abandonment” toward the other are self-deceptions since they too are disguised modes of self-constitution in and through the other.³⁷

Kierkegaard’s analysis of the ways in which love can be a mode of self-constitution is not as developed as one would like. His own reflections at this point are ambiguous and suggest at least two ways in which the other may be related to as a means to the end of becoming a self. First, the relation between the lover and the beloved is compared, as we have noticed above, to the relation between creator and created. The beloved is like a creation in the sense that he is something which the lover forms, shapes, fashions, brings into being so that he is an expression of the lover. The beloved is a product of the lover so that the beloved becomes the lover in the Aristotelean sense of the self’s becoming.³⁸ Kierkegaard, as we have already noticed, agrees with Aristotle’s claim that when the lover is related to the beloved as creator to product, the lover loves the beloved more than the beloved loves the lover. This is so, Kierkegaard asserts, because “there is more ‘being’ . . . in the first relation than in the second. . . .”³⁹ The lover loves himself only when he *is* something to love. In objects which he creates, he becomes a real, tangible, identifiable thing. In love, the lover ceases to be merely a possibility, an

34 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

35 *Ibid.*, pp. 68–9. Cf. “But falling in love is self-love; erotic love is self-love. In erotic love I keep my own idea of what is lovable and find that the object completely suits my head and my heart; this is why I love the beloved so ardently – that is, I ardently love myself.” *SKJP*, II, 1411.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 69. Cf. “The beloved are . . . called, remarkably and significantly enough, the *other-self* . . . But wherein lies self-love? It lies in the I, in the self. Would not self-love then, still remain in loving the other-self, the other I?” *WL*, p. 66. Kierkegaard’s italics.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

38 *NE*, IX, 7.

39 *SKJP*, III, 2441.

imaginative reality, a mere image in his own mind. On this view, the individual becomes a concrete, identifiable and worthy self in the transition from possibility to actuality in and through the beloved.

Departing from his discussion of *eros* and friendship, Kierkegaard describes the person who seeks to create himself through the domination of others as one who is utterly incapable of genuine love. Such persons who use *eros* and friendship as disguised modes of self-assertion do not love the other at all, for "only true love loves every man according to his own individuality. *The strong, the domineering* person lacks flexibility, and he lacks a sense of awareness of others; he demands his own with everyone; he wills that everyone shall be recreated in his image, be trimmed according to his pattern for human beings. . . . If the strong and domineering individual cannot create, he wants at least to remodel; he seeks his own so that wherever he points he can say: see, this is my image, this is my ideal, this is my will. Whether the strong and domineering individual is allotted a great sphere of activity or a small one, whether he is a tyrant in an empire or a house-tyrant in a little attic room, the essence is the same: domineeringly unwilling to go out of himself, domineeringly wanting to crush the other person's individuality or make life miserable for him."⁴⁰ For those persons lacking the internal resilience to assert themselves over others, there is the possibility of identifying with a larger group of people through which one collectively accomplishes the same goal of self-constitution. Kierkegaard identifies the weak as those who band together in groups to attain for themselves what they cannot acquire individually.⁴¹

But there are other passages in *Works of Love*⁴² which suggest a second mode of self-constitution through a relation of love. These passages come very close to Sartre's analysis of love in *Being and Nothingness* where he argues that to love is to want to be loved.⁴³ This definition of love does not mean that the lover in addition to loving the beloved also wants to be loved. On the contrary, Sartre means by this phrase that loving is nothing more than wanting to be loved. In this case, the lover becomes a concrete and identifiable

40 *WL*, pp. 252–53.

41 This mode of self-constitution will be discussed below in the section entitled "The Natural Self in Public Relations."

42 *WL*, p. 69.

43 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1968), pp. 474–84.

self not through acting on the beloved but by being acted upon by the beloved. The characters Garcin and Estelle in Sartre's "No Exit"⁴⁴ are illustrations of this analysis of love in *Being and Nothingness*. Garcin understands that his role in the French Resistance and his attempted flight to Mexico in order to start a resistance newspaper cannot be an act of heroism unless it is so construed by someone else. Garcin cannot decide whether his effort to leave France, resulting in his arrest for desertion, was an act of cowardice or courage. He acts as though the only way in which the ambiguity can be resolved is for someone to regard him as a hero. He seeks this esteem first in Estelle whom he subsequently abandons because he suspects her motives for cooperating with him. Later Garcin decides that it is the lesbian Inez whom he will approach since her acknowledgement of him as heroic would not be sexually motivated. The case is the same with Estelle who understands that she cannot *be* desirable unless she is desired; she therefore seeks the cooperation of Garcin in becoming a self which is sexually attractive and appealing. Both Garcin and Estelle in this play require another person in order to become a concrete and identifiable self. Sartre's version of the social constitution of human selfhood is the basis of his own version of the war of all against all.

In this type of selfish self-love the lover is not an active agent, as in the first case, but a passive object desiring only to be acted upon by the beloved. In this case, the lover wants to become a concrete and identifiable self through the agency of the beloved.⁴⁵ Kierkegaard quite correctly sees that this mode of self-love leads in the direction of self-deification in the sense that the lover desires ultimately nothing less than to become the center of the beloved's life.⁴⁶ The lover wants to become, in Sartre's terms, the beloved's "project". Put another way, the lover wants to become the beloved's absolute. All actions and values are then decided upon with reference to this center of one's world in which case the lover becomes a god in the eyes of the beloved.

In personal relations, we discover not a battle growing out of the impulse to survive but, more fundamentally, a battle for oneself growing out of the impulse to self-constitution. In the use of the other, one comes to an awareness

44 Jean-Paul Sartre, "No Exit," trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Random House, 1946).

45 *WL*, p. 69.

46 *Ibid.*

of oneself as somebody, as an identity which stands out from all other things, as ontologically distinct, unique, and worthy. One sees in eros and friendship the "natural tendency" to reach out, dominate, and order all things in the basic interest of one's own self-constitution. This is a disturbing claim. To make this point, he selects the seemingly most benign and gracious of all social relations, eros and friendship, to expose the basic egocentricity of all human selves.⁴⁷

Thus far in this discussion of Kierkegaard's conception of the natural self, we have seen emerging three constituent elements of all immediate relations between individuals. First, the individual in an immediate social relation is not self-conscious. That is to say, the individual is lacking in a full awareness of the nature of his own self and mistakenly views himself in and through the other. Both social relations are devoid of what Kierkegaard calls spirit and are therefore incomplete expressions of oneself. Second, we have seen how in the state of immediacy all relations of love are attempts at self-constitution. The other is required in the emergence of the individual as a human self. So in this state of nature, we discover the social nature of human selfhood. Third, we have seen that immediacy, though social in nature, is also a state of conflict. The social fabric of immediacy is one of struggling for power over the other in the pursuit of one's own self-identity. Immediacy is painfully paradoxical: We cannot *be* without the other, yet the other is the greatest possible threat to achieving success in one's struggle *to be*. Self-love which is selfish generates conflict in that each individual who loves himself selfishly relates to the other as a means to the end of becoming a concrete and identifiable self.

The Natural Self in Public Relations

The private relation is not the only arena in which the egotism of the natural self asserts itself. Kierkegaard observed the presence of egotism in property

47 It is important to state explicitly that Kierkegaard makes a distinction between egotism and all forms of love including eros and friendship. The different forms of love are not essentially evil. They are merely the victims of the natural self's inclination to attempt to become a self through the possession of another person. This possession frequently takes the misleading form of love which leads Kierkegaard to conclude that in most instances, love is a deception in the sense that lovers, friends and parents for example, deceive themselves in failing to see that their own interests and needs dominate these relations. In Kierkegaard's view, eros and friendship are life's greatest fortune. (*WL*, p. 249.) The issue is how to preserve them from the contamination of egotism.

and class relations as well. And as the egotism of private relations is often disguised as love, the egotism in public relations is often disguised as political activity ostensibly committed to the dissolution of human poverty and powerlessness. The struggle for property and power were also in Kierkegaard's view essentially a struggle for self-identity. In his discussion of the anxiety which accompanies one's social, economic, and political status,⁴⁸ one sees clearly Kierkegaard's perception of the spiritual character of human conflict in the public dimensions of human life.

Human beings in their natural state, unlike other species of living things, require "the other" in order to be. We have already seen how this is the case in private relations. Now we have Kierkegaard appealing to the same principle in his analysis of class relations. Describing man in his natural state, Kierkegaard claims that "in order to be himself, a man must first be expertly informed about what the others are, and thereby learn to know what he himself is – in order then to be that."⁴⁹ Given the impossibility of being human without the other, "it seems as though he must constantly wait for the others in order to learn to know what he is now, at this moment."⁵⁰ Existing for the natural self "lies in existing only before others, in not knowing of anything else but the relationship to others."⁵¹ Therefore, "he is what the others make of him, and what he makes of himself by only being for others."⁵²

This self-determination which is based on one's reference to others is no less a reality in public than in private human relationships. The complicated network of collective and public relations established in the economic, political, social, and cultural arenas of life may also become the media through which individuals seek to establish themselves as concrete, identifiable, and worthy selves. In these cases, the human concretion which becomes desirable as the source of identity and worth may include a variety of different phenomena. It may be, for example, that money, race, cultural heritage, or sexuality becomes the identifying and valuing distinction. In any case, conflict between groups is based on the struggle either to maintain the valuable phenomenon, e. g., money, or the phenomenon as valuable, e. g., sexuality or

48 *CD*, pp. 5–94.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

race, in order to maintain one's view of oneself as being concrete and worthy. Any opposition which seeks to deprive one of the valuable phenomenon or the phenomenon as valuable is resisted and, if necessary, destroyed. Coercion is an essential ingredient of human relationships within nature, for it becomes necessary at times to resist forcibly those who would deprive one of that which identifies one as a concrete and worthy being.

In *Christian Discourses*, Kierkegaard analyzes this conflict between groups as class conflict based on the struggle for economic and political power. In these discourses, Kierkegaard's analysis of class conflict does not settle on the economic and political dimensions of such conflict but on the spiritual nature of the tension. Class conflict is an essential feature of all natural human relations, because it rises out of the struggle for identity. While it is true that economic and political issues are genuinely at stake in class conflict Kierkegaard sees underlying these tangible struggles a more fundamental struggle for human self-identity. Since one's identity is dialectically constituted in relation to the other, the conflict between classes is essentially nothing less than a conflict generated by the struggle to be a concrete, identifiable, and valuable self. In fact, it is from Kierkegaard's perspective mistaken to distinguish the struggle for political and economic power from the spiritual struggle to become a self. Since all natural human relations are egotistical, political and economic power becomes the means whereby members of the ruling class establish their identity through the domination of the lower class. Moreover, "the lowly man ... sinks under the prodigious weight of comparison which he lays upon himself."⁵³ He is "tortured by the thought of being *nothing*, tortured by the fruitlessness of his efforts to be something."⁵⁴ His "anxiety is to become something in the world. ... To be [simply] a man ... is not to be anything – that is in fact to be nothing, for in this there is no distinction from nor advantage over all men. ... But to be Councillor of Justice – that would be something. ..."⁵⁵

To have power is to be something; to be powerless is to be nothing. And since one cannot be powerful unless there is powerlessness one must have the other *qua* powerless in order to be. Maintaining these class distinctions

53 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

54 *Ibid.* Kierkegaard's italics.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

between the powerful and the powerless, the wealthy and the poor, is essential for the natural self if there is to exist any possibility of gaining identity, being, in the world. Thus, it is not ironic for members of the lower class to cling to the system which suppresses them, for without it there would be no chance of ever becoming a concrete, identifiable, and valuable self. Thus, the lowly man »desires to belong to the temporal ... he will not let it go, he clings tighter to being nothing, tighter and tighter as he seeks in vain to be something. ...»⁵⁶

The lowly man clings to a social, economic, and political system which requires class distinctions, because it offers him the possibility of becoming a self. Likewise, the high man clings to the same system, for it is the source of his being as well. While the low man's anxiety is that he is nothing, the high man's anxiety is that he will become nothing. The anxiety of highness is the fear that one will lose one's being through the loss of class position.⁵⁷ It is clear, then, that this dialectical constitution of selfhood is not only conceptually grasped by the thinker but also is directly experienced by all human beings as fear of the other and as anxiety about one's own identity or being. The high man, for example, "secures himself in every way, since he describes danger everywhere, plots everywhere, envy everywhere. ..."⁵⁸ His fear of the other is anxiety over himself. The loss of class identity is self-dissolution. Since class identity and being are essentially related, one requires the other in order to be, and yet the other is the greatest possible threat to one's becoming a concrete self within the realm of immediacy.

While this struggle for identity may be carried out publically in the struggle for economic and political power, it may also be present in social and cultural conflict. In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard describes as "small-minded" those persons who band together and prejudicially exclude all those who do not share in some common trait or characteristic which they regard as peculiarly distinguishing. "Small-mindedness has fastened itself tightly to a very particular shape and form which it calls its own; only this does it seek, and only this can it love. If small-mindedness finds this, then it loves. Thereby small-mindedness sticks together with small-mindedness; they grow together like an ingrown

56 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 60.

58 *Ibid.*

nail, and spiritually speaking it is just as bad. This association of small-mindedness is then praised as the highest love, as true friendship, as true, steadfast, sincere harmony."⁵⁹ Such prejudicial and cowardly small-mindedness "feels . . . a damp, unpleasant anxiety upon observing another person's individuality and nothing is more important than to get rid of it."⁶⁰ All those not possessing this trait or characteristic are excluded yet feared for their individuality stands as a constant threat to the identifying and valuing trait of such a closed society.

This tension is forcefully illustrated in Flannery O'Connor's excellent short story, "Every Thing That Rises Must Converge".⁶¹ The story takes place on a bus in a small town in the deep south. Its two main characters include a lower middle class white woman, who is middle aged and fiercely proud of her southern aristocratic heritage, and her one son, Julian, who has just graduated from a small southern college and is presently selling typewriters until he can launch a writing career. The main portion of the story occurs as the two are riding to the downtown YWCA where Julian's mother plans to attend her weekly weight reducing class. At a stop, the bus is boarded by a black woman and her young four-year-old son who immediately attracts Julian's mother's attention. Throughout the remainder of the bus ride, Julian's mother makes gratuitous and condescending gestures of the sort that one makes to an inferior. She smiles condescendingly and plays peek-a-boo with this "cute" black child. These patronizing gestures continue as they get off the bus when Julian's mother gives the young boy a "shiny new penny". The black mother's rage which has been slowly building throughout the bus ride finally erupts, with a slap across the white woman's face. She then grabs her son's hand and storms down the sidewalk leaving Julian's mother dazed and sprawled on the ground.

Julian accepts this violent reproach as a lesson justly deserved. "He saw no reason to let the lesson she had had go without backing it up with an explanation of its meaning. She might as well be made to understand what had happened to her. 'Don't think that was just an uppity Negro woman,' he

59 *WL*, p. 254.

60 *Ibid.*

61 Flannery O'Connor, *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Girous, 1965).

said. 'That was the whole colored race which will no longer take your condescending pennies. . . . What all this means,' he said, 'is that the old world is gone.'⁶² His remonstrance at the end of the story, "you aren't who you think you are,"⁶³ is a direct attack on her claim throughout the story that she knows who she is. Their conversation up to the encounter with the black woman is laced with his mother's assurances that she knows who she is. It is clear that her self-concept is linked with her white heritage which requires the continuing servitude of the blacks. That the blacks will no longer allow Julian's mother this self-concept is symbolized by the black woman's attack on her at the bus stop. The story ends with O'Connor's description of her face as "fiercely distorted" beyond recognition symbolizing her own loss of identity in the black woman's defiance." "Julian," O'Connor writes, "was looking into a face he has never seen before."⁶⁴ The black woman's violence had left Julian's mother without a recognizable identity. Self-consciousness and class consciousness were indistinguishable in the sense that her entire being was predicated on the subjugation of the black. The black woman's denial of this social arrangement constituted nothing less than the denial of white identity. Moreover, O'Connor portrays this social arrangement as one of "innocence", as "natural" as breathing. Only Julian, who had been away to college and had gained a critical reflective distance on his own heritage, was able to understand and criticize the black-white relation as it had developed in the history of the South. The story forcefully conveys Kierkegaard's notion of the spiritual ground of cultural and class conflict in its portrayal of Julian's mother as one who "naturally" and "innocently" builds an identity in and through the subjugation of the black.

It is important to notice that this example is not intended to convey the understanding that egotism is present only in extreme and dramatic situations involving prejudice and exploitation. It is Kierkegaard's view that all group relations within immediacy are essentially governed by this self-seeking principle. So subtle are these relations at times that it is not always possible to see the egotism that it so clearly apparent in O'Connor's short story. In Kierkegaard's view, all group conflict within immediacy has egotism as its chief

62 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

64 *Ibid.*

motivating principle even though such conflict may appear in political, economic, and cultural terms. This is not to suggest that the conflict as it appears is an unreal one. It is only to imply that one does not get to the root of such conflict until it has been construed in terms of egotism.

Conclusion

It should be evident by now that it would be mistaken to believe that Kierkegaard's term "natural man" refers to some a-historical or a-social state of nature in which human beings exist independently of history and social structures. As is apparent, the natural man is one who may exist in varying sorts of social structures but is necessarily social. There can be no such thing as an a-social state of human existence for Kierkegaard since by definition man is a social animal. To exist in a natural state or in a state of nature for Kierkegaard implies a social mode of existing. Indeed, the existence of what Kierkegaard calls the natural man requires the existence of the other. So closely aligned are the natural man and social existence that one cannot exist without the other. Thus, the state of nature is necessarily social in character. We can see more clearly that the excessively abstract character of the self as developed in the pseudonymous writings is significantly altered in the later literature. Here Kierkegaard argues that the self cannot be conceived independently either of the other or of the concrete and material conditions constituting the individual's historical situation. It is important to close this paper with the observations that the social character of selfhood informs Kierkegaard's conception not only of the natural but also the ethico-religious self. But there is not time to pursue further this aspect of Kierkegaard's later thought.