

# DEATH AS A TEACHER OF LOVE

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*Abstract:* In this paper, I will argue that Kierkegaard considers death an instructor that can teach us valuable lessons about existence and make us love each other in a more genuine way. This idea appears in three different claims made by Kierkegaard: First, reflecting on death can help us love the neighbor by showing us our essential equality before God. Second, love towards the dead teaches us how to love the living correctly and becomes a kind of test we can apply to ourselves in order to ensure the purity of our love. Finally, an analysis of Kierkegaard's concepts of earnestness and regret demonstrates that death can impel us to love each other by showing us what is essential in life. Among other things, this discussion aims to illustrate that there is very much a loving and humanizing aspect in Kierkegaard's views on death, unlike what some commentators have suggested.

*Keywords:* death, earnestness, equality, neighborly love, regret

## 1. Introduction

To most of us, love and death might seem like opposed aspects of existence. While the one gives meaning to our lives, the other takes it away; while the one unifies, the other separates; while the one is a source of profound bliss and comfort, the other causes torment, grief, and anxiety. There is no compromise or overlap between these forces, says W.H. Auden; it is an either-or: "We must love another or die."<sup>1</sup> Especially when we consider the vulnerability of those we care about, the nihilistic side of our mortality becomes obvious. As Laura Llevadot puts it: "How can we believe, in this life, when death takes away what we love most?"<sup>2</sup>

In Kierkegaard's thought, no such stark contrast between death and love is to be found. Instead, his various discussions of the two themes throughout his oeuvre promote the idea that death can actually have a transforming, ennobling effect on our love. This paper aims to highlight some of the ways in which our mortality, and that of those around us, can impact the way we love. According to Kierkegaard, ethical

<sup>1</sup> W.H. Auden, "September 1, 1939," Poets.org, accessed April 22, 2024, <https://poets.org/poem/september-1-1939>.

<sup>2</sup> Laura Llevadot, "Kierkegaard, Levinas, Derrida: The Death of the Other," in *Kierkegaard and Death*, ed. Patrick Stokes and Adam J. Buben (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), p. 213.

action, including love, is always “a doing that is related to a knowing,” and I will suggest that death can provide us with the “knowing” that we can then express in our works of love.<sup>3</sup> I will thus argue that Kierkegaard considers death an instructor that can teach us valuable lessons about existence and make us love each other in a more genuine way. In doing so, I hope to articulate a connection that has not been talked about much in the general literature.<sup>4</sup> Before taking a closer look at death’s function as a teacher, it will be necessary to give some context regarding Kierkegaard’s views on love and death respectively.

## 2. Kierkegaard's Views on Love

That love constitutes the center of Kierkegaard’s ethics is hardly in question. In *Works of Love*, the duty to love is the most divine task assigned to human beings: “Only by loving the neighbour can a person achieve the highest, because the highest is to be able to be an instrument in the hand of Governance.”<sup>5</sup> Those who truly love are saved from all deception, since they are the only ones who have grasped that “the highest good and the greatest blessedness . . . is to love, and next, truly to be loved.”<sup>6</sup> Kierkegaard’s account of love revolves around the Christian commandment to love one’s neighbor. He repeatedly contrasts neighborly love with what he calls preferential love, meaning friendship and romantic love. According to Kierkegaard, only love for the neighbor can be considered true love, as it is founded on the eternal, godly duty rather than a transient inclination or whim, as is the case with preferential love.

Kierkegaard’s main problem with preferential love is that it is selfishness in disguise and as such is opposed to the self-sacrificial character of Christianity. The task of a Christian is to place oneself at the service of God, dedicate oneself to neighborly

<sup>3</sup> SKS 7, 149 / CUP1, 160.

<sup>4</sup> Whereas death’s role of a teacher has been discussed before (see, for instance, Michael Strawser, “Between Mood and Spirit: Kierkegaard’s Conception of Death as the Teacher of Earnestness,” in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), pp. 143–160), the intimate tie with Kierkegaard’s ethics as expressed in *Works of Love* has, in my opinion, not received the attention it deserves. Mélissa Fox-Muraton does note that “Kierkegaard’s understanding of death can only be fully appreciated when understood in its relationship to love,” but her paper takes a different turn by emphasizing “that we must abandon the idea that we are singular, non-interchangeable, irreplaceable individuals, that our loves are singular non-replaceable events,” which will not be part of my discussion here. See Mélissa Fox-Muraton, “Love, Death, and the Limits of Singularity,” in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), pp. 270, 284.

<sup>5</sup> SKS 9, 91 / WL, 86.

<sup>6</sup> SKS 9, 240 / WL, 239.

love, and “exist equally for unconditionally every human being.”<sup>7</sup> Christian love is founded on the realization of an essential equality among all human beings: “In being king, beggar, rich man, poor man, male, female, etc., we are not like each other—therein we are different. But in being the neighbour we are all unconditionally like each other.”<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard sharply criticizes our tendency to get wrapped up in the multifariousness of earthly life and compare ourselves to each other on the basis of superficial criteria, noting that “we seem to have forgotten that the dissimilarity of earthly life is just like an actor’s costume.”<sup>9</sup> Such a view distracts us from recognizing the neighbor in every person and leads us to love a few selected individuals preferentially instead of seeking kinship with all human beings. With his claim that we are to love everyone equally, Kierkegaard does not, however, refer to some abstract love for humanity as a whole. Rather, we are to love the very concrete people we encounter for their uniqueness.<sup>10</sup>

The emphasis of *Works of Love* lies on the *works*, as Kierkegaard’s main purpose is to get us to practice and express love in actuality. Love is an ethical action rather than a mere feeling of connection and intimacy. However, he also repeatedly draws our attention to the incredible difficulties that come with dedicating oneself to the love commandment. Loving everyone equally is a radical doctrine that demands painful sacrifices, including the renunciation of all worldly happiness that comes with erotic love and friendship. Nonetheless, Kierkegaard holds that neighborly love is the highest ideal we can commit ourselves to. The participation in God’s project will give one’s love eternal significance and lift it outside the realm of temporality and finitude, and in the end, he declares: “To love people is the only thing worth living for, and without this love you are not really living.”<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Kierkegaard’s Views on Death

I will now proceed to outline, in somewhat more depth, several aspects of Kierkegaard’s views on death which will be relevant for the present discussion. I will concentrate on the discourse “At a Graveside,” which has been described by Michael Theunissen as “one of the high points of European thinking about death” and offers the most concise and thorough treatment on the subject, even though many of

<sup>7</sup> SKS 9, 89 / WL, 84.

<sup>8</sup> SKS 9, 94 / WL, 89.

<sup>9</sup> SKS 9, 92 / WL, 87.

<sup>10</sup> SKS 9, 268 / WL, 269.

<sup>11</sup> SKS 9, 368 / WL, 375.

Kierkegaard's pseudonymous as well as signed writings touch on death in one way or another.<sup>12</sup>

A characteristic element of Kierkegaard's philosophy is the absence of a strict differentiation between life and death. Death is not so much a distant event lying in a faraway future rather than a fundamental aspect of human existence intersecting with our present life in a profound and meaningful manner. This raises the question of how to appropriately relate to one's own finitude. The readers of "At a Graveside" are encouraged to adopt what Kierkegaard calls an earnest attitude towards death. According to Kierkegaard, facing death earnestly means "that you think death, and that you are thinking it as your lot, and that you are then doing what death is indeed unable to do—namely, that you are and death also is."<sup>13</sup> Contrary to our usual tendency to avoid thinking about death and to continuously postpone an engagement with it to the future, earnestness requires an individual to confront their own particular mortality at this very moment. Kierkegaard observes that even those of us who do grapple with their death employ various strategies to conceptualize it in a consoling or generalizing manner, such as a restful sleep.<sup>14</sup> However, in order for death to transform our lives in a meaningful way, it is crucial that we disrupt our comfortable indifference and instead face the reality of our mortality head-on.

According to Kierkegaard, relating to death earnestly should evoke a profound transformation of how we live our lives. In order for this to be possible, death's specific characteristics must be grasped, and expressed, in the right manner. One of the necessary insights for an earnest approach to death is the simultaneous certainty and uncertainty of death: it will come, but when and how remains unknowable. Death's uncertainty should disturb and alert us and demonstrate to us the urgency to act *right now*, since we can never know how much time we have left. In combination with the certainty of death, it serves as an insightful guide for the earnest thinker: "No teacher is able to teach the pupil to pay attention to what is said the way the uncertainty of death does when it points to the certainty of death."<sup>15</sup> Since death could terminally interrupt our projects at any point in time, we should dedicate our time to activities whose value does not depend on completion, and focus on how we relate to our

<sup>12</sup> Michael Theunissen, "The Upbuilding in the Thought of Death: Traditional Elements, Innovative Ideas, and Unexhausted Possibilities in Kierkegaard's 'At a Graveside,'" trans. George Pattison, in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2006), p. 321.

<sup>13</sup> SKS 5, 446 / TD, 75.

<sup>14</sup> SKS 5, 450–452 / TD, 80–82.

<sup>15</sup> SKS 5, 463 / TD, 95.

pursuits rather than on what exactly it is that we do.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, death's uncertainty adds urgency to our lives: we realize that time is scarce, and thus, every moment gains infinite significance. As there is "no time to waste," we are impelled towards immediate action rather than procrastination and postponement.<sup>17</sup> Kierkegaard's claim that the earnest contemplation of death both compels us to act and simultaneously illuminates the proper course of action is significant in this context: "The thought of death gives the earnest person the right momentum in life *and the right goal* toward which he directs his momentum."<sup>18</sup> There is thus a twofold power in death: at the same time that it instructs us on what priorities to set, it urges us to act along the lines of these priorities. The earnest thinker therefore understands death's uncertainty as an ethical claim upon them in this very moment.

As is the case with many thinkers labeled as existentialists, Kierkegaard's writings have been widely accused of individualism and selfishness—a criticism that, somewhat unsurprisingly, also extends to his treatment of death. Theunissen, for example, dismisses elements of "At a Graveside" as a "denigration of the dying of others," and further critics have pointed out striking omissions when it comes to the more interpersonal and social features that accompany the phenomenon of death, such as grief and loss.<sup>19</sup> In "A Critical Perspective on 'At a Graveside,'" Gordon Marino disagrees with Kierkegaard's suggestion that the death of other people cannot teach us any meaningful lesson about ourselves and our existence. What Kierkegaard fails to see, according to Marino, is the fact that "moods, the grief and terror, can also be revelatory—can also be teachers."<sup>20</sup> Referring favorably to Lev Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, which makes a point of connecting death with the ethical responsibilities we have towards each other, Marino argues that death awareness should "humanise" us and "ought to have a positive impact on our relationship with other humans, making us better neighbours and more responsive to others."<sup>21</sup> In contrast, Kierkegaard's account of death contains "scarcely a word about the relationship between our death awareness and the ties that bind us," leading Marino to conclude that "for all of its brilliance, the discourse seems inhuman."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>16</sup> SKS 5, 464 / TD, 96.

<sup>17</sup> SKS 5, 448 / TD, 78.

<sup>18</sup> SKS 5, 453 / TD, 83 (emphasis added).

<sup>19</sup> Theunissen, "The Upbuilding in the Thought of Death," p. 336.

<sup>20</sup> Gordon D. Marino, "A Critical Perspective on Kierkegaard's 'At a Graveside,'" in *Kierkegaard and Death*, ed. Patrick Stokes and Adam J. Buben (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), p. 152.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

As I aim to show in the following, for Kierkegaard, the thought of death was very much a humanizing one. It is precisely the ethical tone of the graveside discourse that I already tried to hint at, and which, in my opinion, has been neglected in criticisms such as Marino's. Reading "At a Graveside" alongside *Works of Love* will make it evident that the idea that death can bring us closer together was very much on Kierkegaard's mind, and that death and neighborly love are deeply intertwined in his thought. I will now discuss three different ways in which death, for Kierkegaard, can be considered a teacher of love.

#### 4. Neighborly Love as the Expression of Death's Equality

First, Kierkegaard suggests that death can help us love the neighbor by showing us our equality before God. The major obstacle to loving every person unconditionally is that we remain caught up in our supposed differences, for "the neighbour is one who is equal," and "one sees the neighbour only . . . by looking *away from* the dissimilarities."<sup>23</sup> While during our lifetime our essential equality can hardly be seen because we grow so attached to our uniqueness, death shows us that our dissimilarities are only superficial:

This [essence] you do not get to see here in life; here you see only what the individual represents and how he does it. It is just as in the play. . . . When at death the curtain falls on the stage of actuality . . . then they, too, are all one, they are human beings. All of them are what they essentially were, what you did not see because of the dissimilarity that you saw—they are human beings.<sup>24</sup>

According to Kierkegaard, when we are dead, our dissimilarities do not matter anymore and it gets revealed that they were insignificant in the first place. Death reduces complex relationships to their essence by abolishing the differences that separate us from each other in life. In the grave, all distinctions are replaced by a shared identity as 'the dead': "That all human beings are blood relatives, that is, of one blood, this kinship of life is so often disavowed in life; but that they are of one clay, this kinship of death, this cannot be disavowed."<sup>25</sup> It is not the equality of death per se that Kierkegaard is drawing our attention to, which he calls "terrifying," but rather the "blessed" equality before God of which death can remind us.<sup>26</sup> Thus, Kierkegaard argues that the graveyard is the best place to help us remember our essential equality:

<sup>23</sup> SKS 9, 66, 75 / WL, 60, 68.

<sup>24</sup> SKS 9, 92 / WL, 86–87.

<sup>25</sup> SKS 9, 339 / WL, 345.

<sup>26</sup> SKS 5, 459 / TD, 90.

“If, then, you are bewildered as you consider the multiple paths of life, then go out to the dead, ‘where all parts meet’—then a full view is easy.”<sup>27</sup> The tiny differences in terms of plot sizes and decorations at a graveyard teasingly demonstrate how insignificant our differences in life really were:

That is how loving death is! It is simply love on the part of death that by means of this little difference it calls to mind, in an inspiring jest, the great difference. Death does not say, “There is no difference whatever”; it says, “There you can see what the difference was: half a foot.”<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the thought of death relativizes our differences not by pretending as though we were all the same—which would be an inaccurate understanding of life—but by reminding us of the deeper insignificance of the distinctions we draw among each other. While it seems plausible that an understanding of our equality could also be reached in a different manner, death seems to be the most radical reminder of the vainness that lies in comparing ourselves to each other on the basis of transient criteria. This is because, in Louise Carroll Keeley’s words, “death [gives] a vividness to the eternal which the details of life tend to obfuscate.”<sup>29</sup>

While Kierkegaard suggests that death has the power to show us our equality, his point seems to be that it is not necessary to literally die in order to recognize our essential similarity. Ideally, we should arrive at this realization *before* our death, so we actually have the chance to express the thought of equality as neighborly love while we are still able to act:

In actuality, alas, the individual grows together with his dissimilarity in such a way that in the end death must use force to tear it from him. Yet if someone is truly to love his neighbour, it must be kept in mind at all times that his dissimilarity is a disguise.<sup>30</sup>

This is why Kierkegaard encourages us to go to the graveyard and contemplate death “in order *there* to take an aim at life.”<sup>31</sup> An earnest reflection can thus anticipate the actual confrontation with death and transform our lives in the spirit of equality. As described in “At a Graveside,” the earnest thought of death can remind us of our equality and in this way become a guide for neighborly love:

<sup>27</sup> SKS 9, 339 / WL, 345.

<sup>28</sup> SKS 9, 340 / WL, 346.

<sup>29</sup> Louise Carroll Keeley, “Loving ‘No One,’ Loving Everyone: The Work of Love in Recollecting One Dead in Kierkegaard’s Works of Love,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Works of Love*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999), p. 225.

<sup>30</sup> SKS 9, 93 / WL, 88.

<sup>31</sup> SKS 9, 339 / WL, 345.

Every time earthly dissimilarity wants to tempt, wants to delay, the earnest thought about the equality intervenes and again impels. . . . The earnest thought of death . . . has helped the earnest person to subordinate the most advantageous dissimilarity to the humble equality before God and has helped him to raise himself above the most oppressive dissimilarity into the humble equality before God.<sup>32</sup>

Here again, Kierkegaard emphasizes the *active* character of the earnest thought of death: earnestness “helped you surmount the dissimilarity, to find equality before God and to want to express this equality.”<sup>33</sup> Similarly, in *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard stresses that you should not only understand human equality theoretically, but “express [it] in your life.”<sup>34</sup> Since in death all distinctions are removed, we should disregard all distinctions in life by loving the neighbor in a non-preferential manner. Neighborly love thus becomes the expression of the thought of equality, which is derived from an earnest reflection on death.

In a somewhat cryptic remark, Kierkegaard discusses a dialectical relationship between love and death founded on the idea of equality:

Death, you see, abolishes all dissimilarities, but preference is always related to dissimilarities; yet the way to life and to the eternal goes through death and through the abolition of dissimilarities—therefore only love for the neighbour truly leads to life.<sup>35</sup>

For Kierkegaard, love for the neighbor is the only kind of love that leads to life in a Christian sense. He grounds this in the idea that eternal life is reached through the process of dying, during which, as previously discussed, all dissimilarities are removed. Thus, it is specifically *because of* death that love for the neighbor leads to immortality. Only the dead can be resurrected. At the same time, death teaches us to remove all dissimilarities in life according to its model by loving the neighbor non-preferentially, and such love is itself eternal life in the here and now. The loving expression of equality is thus the highest point we can reach in our temporal, finite existence.

It is precisely neighborly love’s commitment to equality that gives the doctrine its radicality. In defining everyone as equal before God, social hierarchies can be broken down and modes of oppression transcended; unhappy individuals can find comfort in the happiness of fortunate ones rather than envying them, and fortunate ones become

<sup>32</sup> SKS 5, 458 / TD, 89–90.

<sup>33</sup> SKS 5, 459 / TD, 90.

<sup>34</sup> SKS 9, 94 / WL, 89.

<sup>35</sup> SKS 9, 69 / WL, 62.



compassionate with those worse off than themselves.<sup>36</sup> Only here, in the spirit of equality founded on the earnest thought of death, does genuine love become possible.

### 5. Loving the Living like the Dead

I will now move on to consider a second way in which death for Kierkegaard can be a teacher of love. Just like death as a phenomenon can teach us valuable lessons about love, the dead themselves can show us how to love the living correctly. The chapter “The Work of Love in Recollecting One Who is Dead” from *Works of Love* makes a clear point that we not only have the duty to love the living beings around us, but also those who have passed away: “If we are to love the persons we see, then also those we have seen but see no more because death took them away.”<sup>37</sup> That we should keep loving those who have passed away may seem an obvious and unnecessary remark for those of us who have recently lost a loved one and are painfully reminded of their absence every day. However, Kierkegaard notes that “to recollect [one who is dead] is something different from not being able to forget him at first.”<sup>38</sup> While we might grieve over someone intensely for a while, life draws us back in eventually, and we tend to move on after an initial period of mourning.<sup>39</sup> Unlike the living, the dead cannot demand our attention any more, and new excitements and sorrows will gradually wash away our memory of the one who passed away. Given the unreliable nature of our feelings, love towards the dead has to become a duty rather than remain a temporary mood.<sup>40</sup> Since it is so difficult to love the dead in light of worldly distractions and temptations, love for them is virtuous and exemplary, and Kierkegaard suggests that it should constitute the model by which we relate to the living people around us. Thus, if we want to evaluate the quality of our love, we should watch how we relate ourselves to the dead.<sup>41</sup>

Kierkegaard argues that recollecting the dead is one of the most unselfish, freest, and most faithful works of love. First, such love is *unselfish* because we can never expect any repayment from the dead for our love. In our relationships with the living,

<sup>36</sup> SKS 5, 459 / TD, 90–91.

<sup>37</sup> SKS 9, 341 / WL, 347–348. This discourse has turned out to be one of the most polarizing sections of *Works of Love*. For a concise overview of the various criticisms and defenses of Kierkegaard’s claims here, see Patrick Stokes, “Duties to the Dead? Earnest Imagination and Remembrance,” in *Kierkegaard and Death*, ed. Patrick Stokes and Adam J. Buben (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), pp. 253–255.

<sup>38</sup> SKS 9, 348 / WL, 355.

<sup>39</sup> SKS 9, 342 / WL, 348.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> SKS 9, 340–341 / WL, 346–347.

there is always the possibility of receiving a reward or compensation for our love, which makes it very hard to tell whether we are actually loving them selflessly or not (for Kierkegaard, even reciprocity is a form of repayment). With the dead, however, “there is no prospect whatsoever” that they could return our favor or give something back to us.<sup>42</sup> As disheartening as it may be that the ones we lost have become silent forever and will not respond to our expressions of love in any way, it has the advantage that we can use our relationship towards them as a test to see how unselfish our love is. If we notice that our love towards the dead fades away after an initial period of grief, it is being exposed as essentially selfish. Only if it abides throughout a permanent experience of lack of reciprocity we can call our love selfless.

Next, Kierkegaard suggests that love towards the dead is *free* because the dead cannot ask us to love them.<sup>43</sup> Most of us agree with the statement that true love should be unrestrained and voluntary, but in reality, we are often compelled or nudged to love another person in various ways. “What can extort from one a work of love can be extremely varied,” Kierkegaard comments, and goes on to classify even the crying of children as a compelling force that makes our love towards them less free.<sup>44</sup> The dead, however, cannot place any such demand on us.<sup>45</sup> They are unable to make themselves noticeable or motivate us to keep caring about them after their passing. Following the principle “out of sight, out of mind,” most people will eventually become absorbed in life again and quickly forget those helpless ones who cannot draw attention to themselves any more.<sup>46</sup> However, if our love is truly free, we will continue to recollect the dead even when they cannot ask us to do so in any way.

Finally, loving the dead is one of the most *faithful* works of love.<sup>47</sup> Often in our relationships to the living, we blame a break in the relationship on the fact that the other person has changed—for instance, that they have become older, colder, less attractive, or disinterested in us—and thus think that we are justified in moving on from them.<sup>48</sup> The dead person, however, “has the strength of changelessness”—they cannot

<sup>42</sup> SKS 9, 343–344 / WL, 349–350.

<sup>43</sup> SKS 9, 345 / WL, 351.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> It seems obvious that Kierkegaard is somewhat one-sided in these remarks. In the sense that I could still imagine a deceased person watching over my actions or hear their voice in my head telling me what to do, the dead can very well exercise a compelling power over the living. I take it that he brackets these kinds of situations because in this case, it is *me* compelling *myself* through recalling another person, rather than the actual person themselves.

<sup>46</sup> SKS 9, 348 / WL, 354.

<sup>47</sup> SKS 9, 348 / WL, 355.

<sup>48</sup> SKS 9, 350 / WL, 356–357.

become different from how they used to be in any way.<sup>49</sup> Thus, any alterations to the relationship between a living and a dead person are to blame on the lack of faithfulness on the side of the one who is alive, since the dead one is unable to change.<sup>50</sup> Kierkegaard recognizes that “it is truly a difficult task to maintain oneself unchanged in time,” but if the relationship remains the same, it indicates faithfulness on the lover’s part.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, besides the actual duty of loving recollection we have towards the dead—which in fact has been neglected by much Kierkegaard scholarship—the love we feel for the dead should also constitute the model by which we love the living.<sup>52</sup> Hence, the love for the dead becomes a kind of test we can apply to ourselves in order to make sure we are not following the path of preferential love, but instead learn to love the neighbor in a selfless manner:

The work of love in recollecting one who is dead is thus a work of the most unselfish, the freest, the most faithful love. Therefore go out and practice it; recollect the one who is dead and just in this way learn to love the living unselfishly, freely, faithfully. In the relationship to one who is dead, you have the criterion by which you can test yourself. . . . Recollect the one who is dead; then in addition to the blessing that is inseparable from this work of love you will also have the best guidance for rightly understanding life: that it is our duty to love the people we do not see but also those we see.<sup>53</sup>

In this way, again, relating to death and the dead in the right manner can help us lead a loving existence. The loss of a loved person should not be something we quickly move on from or get over after a while, but at the same time it should not paralyze us or plunge us into despair.<sup>54</sup> Instead, we should focus on performing the duties we have towards the dead and understand them as an instruction in love for the ones still alive. As George Pattison comments, “the aim of such a graveyard promenade, then,

<sup>49</sup> SKS 9, 350 / WL, 357.

<sup>50</sup> This applies even if we find out something new and unpleasant about the dead person, since the true lover looks away from others’ sins rather than towards them: “The one who loves discovers nothing; therefore he hides the multitude of sins that could be found through discovery” (SKS 9, 283 / WL, 285). Thus, if new knowledge about the deceased modifies one’s love, it was never love in the highest sense.

<sup>51</sup> SKS 9, 349 / WL, 355.

<sup>52</sup> The fact that Kierkegaard claims that loving the dead is a duty in itself which cannot merely be reduced to a test for how to love the living has been emphasized and developed, for instance, in Jeremy J. Allen, “The Soft Weeping of Desire’s Loss: Recognition, Phenomenality, and the One Who Is Dead in Kierkegaard’s Works of Love,” in *Kierkegaard and Death*, ed. by Patrick Stokes and Adam J. Buben (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), p. 236, and in Stokes, “Earnest Imagination and Remembrance,” p. 255.

<sup>53</sup> SKS 9, 351 / WL, 358.

<sup>54</sup> SKS 9, 49–50 / WL, 42–43.

is not to lose ourselves in debilitating melancholic thoughts, but to learn or re-learn what is essential in life and what is being demanded of us in life, in our relationships with the living.”<sup>55</sup>

## 6. Mortality, Essential Work, Urgency, and Regret

Finally, Kierkegaard suggests that our mortality can impel us to put our lives in the service of love. Reading “At a Graveside” and *Works of Love* alongside each other indicates that the prospect of our own death, if appropriated earnestly, can lead us to love our neighbor. A main feature of what Kierkegaard considers an earnest relationship between a person and their mortality is that it compels them to action and serves as a wake-up call to lead a meaningful life. As already explained earlier in the discussion of Kierkegaard’s views on death, thinking about our death can both help us find the right priorities in life and also provide the urgency to act upon those.<sup>56</sup> Awareness of our finitude will help us evaluate and judge which tasks are worth pursuing during our lifetime: “No surveillance is so ennobling as the uncertainty of death when it examines the use of time and the nature of the work . . . of the one acting.”<sup>57</sup> The earnest thought of death disrupts a person in their everyday activities,

so that he was halted and halted again in order to renounce vain pursuits, was prompted and prompted again to hasten on the road of the good, now was weaned of being talkative and busy in life in order to learn wisdom in silence, now learned not to shudder at phantoms and human inventions but at the responsibility of death, now learned not to fear those who kill the body but to fear for himself and fear having his life in vanity, in the moment, in imagination.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, death is something that can show us the way of the good, help us re-evaluate what really matters, and make us center our lives around “essential” (*væsentlig*) as opposed to “incidental” (*tilfældig*) work.<sup>59</sup> In Michael Strawser’s words, “a reflection on one’s own death is transformed into a reflection on one’s life, and it changes the emphasis of earnestness to focus on meaningful actions that produce the good to be experienced by others as well as oneself.”<sup>60</sup> Patrick Stokes similarly emphasizes the ethical nature of earnestness, suggesting it “involves an apprehension of my death . . .

<sup>55</sup> George Pattison, “Kierkegaard, Metaphysics, and Love,” in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), p. 193.

<sup>56</sup> SKS 5, 452–453 / TD, 83.

<sup>57</sup> SKS 5, 463 / TD, 95–96.

<sup>58</sup> SKS 5, 448 / TD, 77.

<sup>59</sup> SKS 5, 464 / TD, 96.

<sup>60</sup> Strawser, “Death as the Teacher of Earnestness,” p. 158.

as conferring moral demands.”<sup>61</sup> Since earnestness is always related to a task to be carried out, the relation to death is an ethical call to act *for the good* rather than an aesthetic category. However, as Strawser also observes, “At a Graveside” does not give us a clear picture of what precisely the good is that earnestness supposedly pushes us towards.<sup>62</sup> This is why I will turn to the ethics found in *Works of Love* and look at earnestness in connection with the love commandment. In fact, it seems that for Kierkegaard, death will only gain its upbuilding effect in connection with the thought of the eternal and of God. Thinking about death without love becomes mere nihilism:

To the earnestness of death belongs that remarkable capacity for awakening, this resonance of a profound mockery that, detached from the thought of the eternal, is an empty, often brazen, jest, but together with the thought of the eternal is just what it should be and is utterly different from the insipid earnestness that least of all captures and holds a thought that has the tension the thought of death has.<sup>63</sup>

Given Kierkegaard’s view of love as the highest good of ethical existence, I think we are justified in considering it as at least one of the priorities in life—if not the main one—that the earnest thought of death should convey to us. This can be shown by looking at Kierkegaard’s notion of “essential work,” which is the only clear indication we have for what he has in mind when he is talking about the kinds of action sparked by earnestness:

With regard to the essential work in relation to the interruption of death, it is not essential whether the work was finished or only begun. . . . With incidental work, which is in the external, it is essential that the work be finished. But the essential work is not defined essentially by time and the external, insofar as death is the interruption.<sup>64</sup>

According to this description, love seems to be the essential action *par excellence*. Love is not something one can ever be finished with; it is a duty for one’s whole life, and the recipients of our love have a constant claim on our expression of it.<sup>65</sup> Further, death and temporality cannot in any meaningful way affect or interrupt works of love. Neighborly love is essentially related to God’s law, and participating in it gives our love an eternal significance that lies outside the realm of mere temporality and finitude.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Stokes, “Earnest Imagination and Remembrance,” p. 262.

<sup>62</sup> Strawser, “Death as the Teacher of Earnestness,” p. 151.

<sup>63</sup> SKS 9, 347 / WL, 353.

<sup>64</sup> SKS 5, 464 / TD, 96.

<sup>65</sup> SKS 9, 20 / WL, 12.

<sup>66</sup> SKS 9, 308 / WL, 311.

A helpful way to understand love as essential work is by considering its opposite: busyness. In busyness, a person becomes “divided and scattered” by losing themselves in worldly, temporal pursuits.<sup>67</sup> Here, time becomes everything that matters: the busy person begins thinking along the lines of efficiency and productivity, constantly “hurries ahead to something new,” and calculates how much can possibly be achieved in the least amount of time.<sup>68</sup> The focus lies on the completion of projects rather than the manner in which the result is brought about: “To the temporal and earthly passion the end is unconditionally more important than the means, and therefore this is the passionate person’s torment, . . . that he does not have time under his control, that he always can come too late.”<sup>69</sup> To the person dedicated to love, on the other hand, such a calculative mentality is unknown: “One who loves cannot calculate . . . because to calculate is to make finite.”<sup>70</sup> The person working towards the good does not primarily focus on the end that is achieved, but first and foremost on the means of the good. As their work could be interrupted by things beyond their control, such as death, the end cannot be the focus: “Thus, he is not eternally responsible for achieving his end in temporality, but he is unconditionally eternally responsible for which means he uses.”<sup>71</sup> Essential work means to put oneself in the service of one thing, namely the good, and time matters only insofar as the eternal must gain presence in every moment of one’s life.<sup>72</sup> As love abides throughout time, the true lover “does not relate himself to temporality, is not dependent upon temporality,” and therefore focuses on expressing love in every moment of life, rather than moving on from one worldly project to the next.<sup>73</sup>

Thus, the earnest thought of death becomes the driving force that impels us to love every person unconditionally and equally. By directing our efforts towards works of an essential rather than incidental nature, love becomes the focus of an earnest life. Further, death adds the necessary urgency to our works of love by creating a scarcity of time. Kierkegaard recognizes that we have the dangerous tendency to put off things we want to do because we assume that we will always have more time in the future: “There is a consolation in life, a false flatterer; there is a safeguard in life, a hypocritical deceiver—it is called postponement.”<sup>74</sup> However, the earnest thought of death alerts

<sup>67</sup> SKS 9, 103 / WL, 98.

<sup>68</sup> SKS 8, 129 / UD, 14.

<sup>69</sup> SKS 8, 239–240 / UD, 142.

<sup>70</sup> SKS 9, 178 / WL, 178.

<sup>71</sup> SKS 8, 239 / UD, 141.

<sup>72</sup> SKS 8, 131 / UD, 16.

<sup>73</sup> SKS 9, 308 / WL, 311.

<sup>74</sup> SKS 5, 450 / TD, 79.

us to the self-deception in protraction as well as to the importance of taking action immediately. Since death could come at any moment, we need to dedicate our scarce time to what is essential, and thus we become compelled to love now, today.<sup>75</sup> Love is the kind of work that must not be put off to some indefinite point in the future. The love commandment does not allow any excuses or evasions, but “immediately points the direction and gives the impetus to act accordingly.”<sup>76</sup> Since love is best understood as an infinite debt that has to be paid off for as long as one is alive, it needs to express itself in action at any moment.<sup>77</sup> Contrary to a procrastinator, therefore, the true lover does not waste time with strategizing, contemplating, or calculating, but *acts*:

The one who actually loves continually has a head start, and an infinite head start, because every time the other has come up with, figured out, invented a new expression of devotion, the one who loves has already carried it out, because the one who loves . . . does not waste a moment.<sup>78</sup>

To conclude the discussion of how the right relationship to one’s mortality can compel one towards a more loving existence, I would like to introduce the topic of regret, as I think Kierkegaard’s views on the powers of regret and earnestness complement each other in an illuminating way. Kierkegaard’s discussion of regret in the *Upbuilding Discourses* is particularly helpful to the purpose of this paper since it gives a concrete phenomenology of the confrontation with finitude and thus adds to our understanding of earnestness as expounded in the graveside discourse. Drawing attention to some of the many striking parallels in Kierkegaard’s discussions of regret and an earnest relationship to death will help underline how he connects our mortality with the ethical commandment to love.

In “Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing,” Kierkegaard suggests that regret and repentance can serve as guides that direct us towards the good. Regret in this sense does not denote what would commonly be understood as such, namely the “painful, tormenting worldly grief” felt, for instance, when we realize we should have taken that trip we backed out on or should have bought that house we ultimately decided against.<sup>79</sup> Such “momentary repentance” is “selfish, sensuous, . . . and for this very reason is not repentance.”<sup>80</sup> Instead, regret is essentially a religious-ethical category

<sup>75</sup> SKS 5, 448 / TD, 78.

<sup>76</sup> SKS 9, 100 / WL, 96.

<sup>77</sup> SKS 9, 176 / WL, 176.

<sup>78</sup> SKS 9, 181 / WL, 181.

<sup>79</sup> SKS 8, 132 / UD, 17.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

and “must be an action with a collected mind, so it can be spoken about for upbuilding, so it may of itself give birth to new life.”<sup>81</sup> In repentance, one faces the guilt of not having been a good enough Christian, having been unable to make oneself into the instrument of Governance, and having failed to live up to the demands of the love commandment. In doing so, regret, just like the earnest thought of death, draws attention to what is essential in life and adds urgency to our actions. This is because, according to Kierkegaard, it always comes at the eleventh hour:

When regret calls to a person it is always late. The call to find the road again by seeking God in the confession of sins is always at the eleventh hour. Whether you are young or old, whether you have offended much or little . . . the guilt makes this an eleventh-hour call; the concern of inwardness, which regret sharpens, grasps that this is at the eleventh hour.<sup>82</sup>

Kierkegaard observes that most of us delude ourselves by thinking we have enough time ahead of us to do the right thing, which “is why so much time is wasted and why the whole thing so easily ends in error.”<sup>83</sup> This is also what is characteristic of a non-earnest engagement with one’s mortality that neglects the dialectics of death’s certainty and uncertainty. Regret, on the other hand, “does not have much time at its disposal; . . . it does not deceive with a false notion of a long life, because it is indeed the eleventh hour.”<sup>84</sup> On one hand, the eleventh hour indicates a late point in time—one realizes that one has wasted essential time going astray instead of following the way of the good. On the other hand, it demonstrates that it is not too late—the twelfth hour has not yet struck, and there is still time to change our ways. This is the same idea Kierkegaard is getting at in “At a Graveside” when he says that while earnestness teaches us that with death “all is over,” it simultaneously shows us that as long as we are able to think about death, we are still alive, and thus “all is not over.”<sup>85</sup> By projecting us to the eleventh hour, regret has a similar power to the earnest reflection of death: “How earnest everything is [in the eleventh hour], as if it were the hour of death!”<sup>86</sup> In the eleventh hour, we can experience an immediate confrontation with death as an evaluation of the life we leave behind—without actually dying. The same occurs in the earnest thinker’s reflection on their mortality:

<sup>81</sup> SKS 8, 131 / UD, 16.

<sup>82</sup> SKS 8, 129–130 / UD, 14.

<sup>83</sup> SKS 8, 130 / UD, 15.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> SKS 5, 454 / TD, 85.

<sup>86</sup> SKS 8, 130 / UD, 15.



The earnest person looks at himself; so he knows the nature of the one who would become death's booty here if it were to come today; he looks at his own work and so he knows what work it is that would be interrupted here if death were to come today.<sup>87</sup>

In this moment, we experience what it feels like to already have run out of time, which allows us to fully appropriate the urgency conferred by death's simultaneous certainty and uncertainty into our lives.<sup>88</sup> Earnestness, like regret, is a confrontation with death prior to its occurrence. Thus, in relating to one's own death, one can evaluate one's current existence in the light of one's finitude. This encounter with death that can be achieved both through earnestness and regret in the form of the eleventh hour, then, marks a transition into a new kind of life. It forcefully pulls us out of our habitual ways of going about our lives. As such, regret gives us the opportunity to re-evaluate our priorities and align our lives with God's commandment.

Kierkegaard argues that as long as we have committed ourselves to love, there will be nothing to regret, since "the eternal, if one grasps it in truth, is the only, unconditionally the only thing of which one may unconditionally say: It is never regretted."<sup>89</sup> This explicitly lays out the connection Kierkegaard seems to envision between regret, love, and death: what we regret are (or at least should be) those moments in which we failed to live up to the love commandment. In our regret, we are being transported to the eleventh hour, which marks a confrontation with our own finitude whereby our temporal existence is transformed by awareness of the eternal. Recognizing the urgency and severity of the matter, we become compelled to embark upon the path of the good; that is to say, love. We are able to appropriate the scarce time that lies ahead more profoundly than before and come to see it as the chance to transform our lives in such a way that we will not feel remorse at the moment of our actual death, when it is in fact too late. Regret is thus something helpful when sought out during one's life, and something harmful when occurring in the moment of death. As novelists Sibylle Lewitscharoff and Heiko Michael Hartmann put it: "Repentance belongs in life, because it can improve a person. Guilt is but a dead piece of lead in the trembling hands of the dying ones."<sup>90</sup>

<sup>87</sup> SKS 5, 462 / TD, 94.

<sup>88</sup> For a more elaborate discussion of this, see John J. Davenport, "Life-Narrative and Death as the End of Freedom: Kierkegaard on Anticipatory Resoluteness," in *Kierkegaard and Death*, ed. Patrick Stokes and Adam J. Buben (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), pp. 174–178; and Patrick Stokes, *The Naked Self: Kierkegaard and Personal Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 205–212. For Davenport, this encounter with death is a mere metaphorical one, whereas for Stokes it is phenomenal.

<sup>89</sup> SKS 8, 216 / UD, 114.

<sup>90</sup> "Reue gehört ins Leben, weil sie einen Menschen bessern kann. Schuld ist bloß ein totes Stück Blei in den zitternden Händen der Sterbenden" (Sibylle Lewitscharoff and Heiko Michael Hartmann, *Warten auf: Gericht und Erlösung* [Freiburg: Herder, 2020], p. 38, (trans. mine).

Not feeling the impelling force of regret during one's life—just like refusing to relate oneself to one's finitude in a meaningful way—is, for Kierkegaard, a sign of evading moral responsibility: “If the voice of this guide is never heard, then it is precisely because the way of perdition is being followed.”<sup>91</sup> Besides, even if we go out of our way to avoid regret, it will get to us eventually—only then it will come back when it is too late and will have lost its upbuilding capacity.<sup>92</sup> This is what I would like to refer to, following Stokes, as eschatological regret.<sup>93</sup> Eschatological regret is the shattering remorse over one's life when one has run out of time to change one's ways. According to *Works of Love*, if we fail to understand that love is the highest task and waste our lives with meaningless pursuits, we will regret it at the end of our lives:

Let the one who achieved so very much by means of an alliance and by not existing for all people, let him see to it that death does not change his life for him when it reminds him of the responsibility.<sup>94</sup>

A literary example for such a case can be found in Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, which is often discussed in connection with Kierkegaard's views on death and is also the focal point of Marino's critique.<sup>95</sup> Ivan Ilyich has spent his whole life in thoughtlessness, achieved what was expected of him, and generally considered himself a happy man. It is only in his prolonged process of dying that the protagonist is forcefully confronted with the content of his life, and he despairingly assesses that “everything was wrong.”<sup>96</sup> He feels “suffocated and crushed” when it dawns upon him that he has wasted his life by suppressing all human feelings and entering no meaningful, loving relationship with those around him, and that there is no time to fix things: “I am leaving life with the realisation that I have lost everything I was given and that it's impossible to put right.”<sup>97</sup> Following this realization are three days of unceasing, agonizing screaming that finally culminate in Ivan's unreconciled and disturbing death. There is no hope of salvation for him, as his repentance comes too late.

<sup>91</sup> SKS 8, 128 / UD, 13.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Stokes, *The Naked Self*, p. 211.

<sup>94</sup> SKS 9, 90 / WL, 85.

<sup>95</sup> Elsewhere, Adam Buben and I discuss another piece of literature that exemplifies eschatological regret as the consequence of having failed to take on an earnest relationship to death, namely Hugo von Hofmannsthal's drama *Death and the Fool* (*Der Tor und der Tod*) (see Sophie Höfer and Adam Buben, “The Role of Death in Becoming Subjective and Cultivating Meaning in Kierkegaard,” in *Handbook of the Science of Existential Psychology*, ed. Kenneth Vail, Daryl Van Tongeren, Becca Schlegel, Jeff Greenberg, Laura King, and Richard Ryan (New York: Guilford Press, forthcoming 2024). Here, I have decided to concentrate on Tolstoy's novella in order to make my discussion of Marino's criticism more evident.

<sup>96</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, trans. Peter Carson (New York: Liveright, 2014), p. 108.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., pp. 106, 105.

Here, it becomes clear that the protagonist's eschatological regret refers to not having lived, and loved, properly. Upon his death, Ivan understands the ultimate meaninglessness of his life—the life of a person who did not bring anything good into the world. In the last moments before dying, he realizes that love is the highest and should have been what he lived for.<sup>98</sup> Knowing that this insight comes too late, he feels the overwhelming urge to perform a work of love which, although he is unable to articulate it properly, ultimately releases him from the inertia in which his terminal illness had trapped him. Had Ivan opened himself to regret and earnestness at an earlier point in his life, he would have been able to express the good in love towards those around him when he still had time. As Strawser suggests, the novella conveys more the imperative of *memento amor* rather than a mere *memento mori*.<sup>99</sup>

In summary, by showing us what is essential in life, regret—just like the earnest thought of death—should be the guide that continuously accompanies us and makes us attentive to ourselves and our actions. What Marino observed to be present in Tolstoy's novella but lacking in "At a Graveside,"—namely death's capacity to bring us closer to each other—can indeed be found in Kierkegaard if we consider the main arguments in *Works of Love*. The story of Ivan Ilyich then becomes an illustration of Kierkegaard's thought: on the one hand, it serves as a cautionary tale about putting earnestness off to the end of one's life; on the other hand, it shows that death is ultimately able to turn us into more loving people. For Kierkegaard, an earnest reflection on death and the openness to repentance allow a person to anticipate eschatological regret and thus call them to action in service of the good. Therefore, death gains its retroactive power over our lives by impelling us to follow the good, that is, neighborly love.

## 7. Conclusion

To conclude, we have seen three ways in which death can teach us about love: First, death can make us recognize our essential similarity and overcome superficial comparisons, which is a necessary prerequisite for neighborly love. Second, the love we feel for the dead is so genuine and pure that it can point us towards the right way to love the living. Finally, an earnest awareness of our mortality can teach us to love by showing us what is essential in life. Crucial for all three arguments presented in this paper is Kierkegaard's movement from a contemplative engagement with death towards action in life. Further, in all three examples discussed, it becomes clear that

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>99</sup> Strawser, "Death as the Teacher of Earnestness," pp. 158–159.

death is not by default a teacher. Rather, we need to take on the appropriate relationship to our own and others' deaths so it can impact the way we love. Thus, we need to grasp the specific ways in which death makes us all equal, learn to love the dead in a correct manner, and draw the right conclusions from the uncertainty of death, in order to become better lovers. A further point worth noting is that an actual encounter with death is not necessary to come to these realizations—an earnest anticipation can have the same effect. Thus, a near-death experience, for example, is neither a sufficient, nor a necessary condition for learning from death. Finally, this discussion also illuminates that there is very much a loving and humanizing aspect in Kierkegaard's views on death, unlike what some commentators have suggested—we just need to take a closer look to find it.

*Works of Love* emphasizes over and over again that loving the neighbor is a difficult task, but if we pay close attention, we find a somewhat surprising ally in death. An earnest engagement with death modifies the lover in such a way that they want to live out the essential truths that they have grasped while confronting their mortality. At this point, we might wonder how strong Kierkegaard's claim is: is an earnest relationship to death only a helpful guide or actually a necessary prerequisite for neighborly love? Given death's unique capacity to help us distinguish between what is essential and what is not, one could argue that only through taking on the adequate relationship to their mortality is a person transformed in such a way that genuine love becomes possible. As our mortality is a fundamental aspect of our existence, there is no proper earnest, inward, or subjective person—and therefore no true Christian—who has not in some way grappled with the thought of death. But it also seems plausible that the thought of death, in all its power, is just one of multiple things that may assist those of us struggling to live up to the love commandment. In this interpretation, death becomes just one of the guides, albeit probably the most forceful one, through which we can reach the insights necessary for neighborly love.

Whatever may be the case, it is evident that while death is often considered a source of nihilism, something that deprives our actions of meaning, Kierkegaard shows us ways in which death can actually elevate our ethical lives to a higher, more profound level. Rather than dividing us, death brings us closer to each other. Thus, in the conflict between love and death—if we want to consider them opposed forces at all—it seems like love ultimately has the upper hand.