

## Ethical alterity and asymmetrical reciprocity: A Levinasian reading of *Works of Love*

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**Abstract.** Following and extending the recent tradition of Kierkegaard–Levinas comparativists, this essay offers a Levinasian commentary on salient aspects of Kierkegaard’s ethico-religious deliberations in *Works of Love*, a text that we are unsure whether or not Levinas actually read. Against some post/modern interpreters, I argue that one should adopt *both* a Jewish *and* a Christian perspective (rather than an oversimplified either/or point of view) in exploring the sometimes “seamless passages” between Kierkegaard and Levinas’s thought. The first argument of this essay is that interhuman ethical relationships, as seen by Kierkegaard and Levinas, are premised upon an original asymmetry or inequality. Ethical alterity requires more on the part of the responsible I for the destitute Other. However, this original ethical alterity is not at all the last word in loving and healthy human relationships. In the second section of this study, a dual asymmetry on the part of each participating human yields an “asymmetrical reciprocity,” or in Kierkegaard’s words, “infinity on both sides.” While they are of no concern to me, your ethical duties to me are revealed to you upon our face-to-face encounter.

Here I offer a Kierkegaardian–Levinasian response to Hegel’s and Buber’s thoughts that humans essentially desire recognition, mutuality, and reciprocity from one another in intersubjective relationships. Hegel and Buber are more or less correct, but when seen from a Kierkegaardian and Levinasian perspective, we are offered resources for understanding more precisely how and why their accounts are accurate. Hegel and Buber offer us the second phase of the argument, whereas Kierkegaard and Levinas show us the first and primary phase of interhuman relationships – the revealed and infinite ethical responsibility to the Other person.

### 1.

As a thorough Christian – or, as he would have put it, infinitely interested in becoming one – Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) addressed himself neither to Jews nor to Judaism. But they have overheard him. In part because they could not help it....Approaching him, therefore, Jews are well advised to be on the alert for what they can learn not only about him but about themselves also. – Milton Steinberg<sup>1</sup>

I require a You to become;<sup>2</sup> becoming I, I say You. All actual life is encounter. – Martin Buber<sup>2</sup>

Twentieth century Jewish thinkers Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas offer “acerbic” misreadings of nineteenth century Danish Christian thinker Søren Kierkegaard in their critical analyses of the dialectical poet Johannes de Silentio’s *Fear and Trembling*.<sup>3</sup> They contend that Kierkegaard wishes readers to suspend or transcend the ethical sphere of human existence in favor of a religious relationship with the divine, thus forcing an impossible division, an either/or, amongst one’s duties. Devotion to God, on their views of Kierkegaard, is seen as primary, and a secondary status is hence reserved for ethical interhuman relationships.<sup>4</sup> This view misunderstands Kierkegaard’s thorough conception (and radical reconception) of the ethical. To counter this critique, I hold that, if Buber and Levinas were to acquaint themselves more thoroughly with Kierkegaard’s (“jewgreek”) religious writings, i.e. his signed texts which were published in parallel fashion to the pseudonymous texts, then they would observe that *the ethical* is nowhere sacrificed or transcended.<sup>5</sup> The domain of the ethical is radically reinterpreted in light of one’s explicitly religious relationship with the divine. Moreover, their readings of Silentio’s dialectical poem *Fear and Trembling*, because they are taken out of the context of Kierkegaard’s expansive and multifaceted literary project, could be corrected by a more comprehensive exposure to Kierkegaard’s multifaceted *oeuvre*. Levinas’s references to Kierkegaardian writings other than *Fear and Trembling*, while present, are not numerous. As demonstrated in *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard’s “second ethics” is radicalized and the stakes are raised. It is precisely here that I contend that Levinas would find the most agreement with Kierkegaard’s distinctive ethico-religious positions.

In this essay, I will not be directly responding to Buber’s critique of Kierkegaard, but I will instead offer a partial corrective to Levinas’s misunderstanding of Kierkegaard, and examine the moral concepts of ethical alterity and asymmetrical reciprocity, specifically as they are discussed in the latter’s *Works of Love*. This examination will be conducted through a more charitable Levinasian perspective than Levinas himself was willing or able to offer, which is why I have not subtitled this paper “Levinas’s Reading of *Works of Love*” since we are not sure that that actually happened, but rather “A Levinasian Reading of *Works of Love*.” My overall claim is that Levinas’s Jewish ethical heritage is akin to, and in fact significantly informs, Kierkegaard’s Christian ethics. The ethical dimension of human subjectivity for Levinas is compatible with the Kierkegaard of *Works of Love* and related texts. It is in this regard that I challenge Mark Dooley’s contention that “it is a mistake to think of the Kierkegaardian project in Levinasian terms.”<sup>6</sup> As Jesus Christ himself was a thoroughgoing and socially radical Jew, Kierkegaard’s Christian

agapic ethics of love have their deepest roots in Torah, Jewish teachings and morality. I would like to offer, as Frymer-Kensky et al. (2000) have indirectly suggested, a certain way of reading of Kierkegaard's Christian ethic of love in light of, and in terms of (i.e. back into), its Judaic ethical and religious heritage.<sup>7</sup> As such, I claim that it is not at all a mistake to (anachronistically) read Kierkegaard through key terms in Levinas, and vice versa. Here is advanced a reading of Kierkegaard's ethical Christianity in Levinas's Jewish terms. Thus, Levinas's Jewish ethics of infinite responsibility for the Other person, in my opinion, generates, illuminates and explicates Kierkegaard's understanding of the command "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" as found in the Christian Scriptures.

This essay will take the form not of a straightforward and exhaustive comparative analysis of Kierkegaard and Levinas, but rather it will perform a reading of two aspects of Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* through a Levinasian perspective.<sup>8</sup> I consider how the Levinasian notion of the infinite responsibility that one has for the Other individual (*alter* to my *ego*) is extended to include the Christian command to "love the neighbor as yourself" for Kierkegaard. Additionally, I will suggest that Kierkegaard's ethic of love (as it is informed by Judeo-Christian Scripture) is a material extension of, or midrash on, Jewish mitzvot. Agapic love, for both Levinas and Kierkegaard, is the revelation of the divine in human affairs, the rupture and welcoming of transcendence within immanence, the infinite made manifest in the finite. This essay undertakes to creatively imagine how a Levinasian phenomenology of the ethical would respond to a thorough acquaintance with Kierkegaard in his own voice, and not solely a harshly quick and largely dismissive analysis of the dialectical poem *Fear and Trembling*. Levinas's major troubles with Kierkegaard's alleged "violence" are here allayed.

## 2.

...the relation to the other is awakening and sobering up – that awakening is obligation. – Emmanuel Levinas<sup>9</sup> (*EN*: 114)

Responsibility for the other – the face saying to me "thou shall not kill," and consequently also "you are responsible for the life of this absolutely other other" – is responsibility for the unique one. The "unique one" means the *loved one*, love being the condition of the very possibility of uniqueness. – Emmanuel Levinas (*TO*: 108)

Both Kierkegaard and Levinas level trenchant critiques against the egoism (and concomitant atheism) of improper self-love. Critics of the

Hegelian system of logic and self-consciousness as the telic end of a rational totality and idealistic worldview, Kierkegaard and Levinas contend that the singular (and/or Other) individual stands over and against said system. Silentio observes, and Kierkegaard himself and Levinas would likely agree, that “the single individual is higher than the universal” (*FT*: 55).<sup>10</sup> In Silentio’s rendering, faith – and as later Kierkegaard and Levinas would add, love – is a paradox when rational categories attempt to comprehend it.<sup>11</sup> Such an existential reality and pathos explicitly evade rational comprehension. How can the single individual, the existent, living in society amongst other individuals and communities, be higher than the universal understood as *Sittlichkeit*? For Kierkegaard, faith is an existential and absurd choice to repeatedly accept the paradox of the infinite, God, becoming finite and temporal, human.

Levinas contends, in *Totality and Infinity* as elsewhere, that egoism and atheism go hand in hand. He asks, “[H]ow can the same, produced as egoism, enter into relationship with an other without immediately divesting it of its alterity? What is the nature of this relationship?” (*TI*: 38).<sup>12</sup> One does not establish an ethical relation with the Other human individual if the Other is not radically alter to (i.e. otherwise than) my ego. Subsuming the Other into the same is the violent process of Hegelian dialectical progression toward absolute self-consciousness, according to Levinas. “The temptation of temptation,” Levinas observes, “is the temptation of knowledge” (*NTR*: 34). The radical alterity of the Levinasian face-to-face encounter does not preclude ethical responsibility and human consciousness; rather it yields or reveals them. This is a repositioning of the ethical as primary to the metaphysical or epistemological domains of philosophy. Levinas repeatedly contends that the dimension of height that the Other individual has over me is essential in maintaining the separation or difference between ego and alter-ego, or Other individual. For Levinas, the self is essentially a being held hostage to the Other.

Moreover, it is only in and through one’s response to the face of the Other person that human subjectivity and freedom – seen by Kant and Sartre as dimensions of human nature prior to or coexistent with responsibility – actually arise. The human subject is always and ever subject-to the Other. “It is not the concept ‘man’ which is at the basis for humanism,” Levinas maintains, “it is the other man” (*NTR*: 98). This is a radical injunction, or intervention, into the histories of moral thought and various brands of humanistic thinking.

Similarly, in *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard seeks to discover and condemn various manifestations of improper and preferential love (*Elskov*). While not essentially opposed to all modalities and expressions of

self-love, Kierkegaard finds versions of conditional love based on preference or expected return to be dangerous, unstable, and ultimately insecure throughout time and circumstance. Preferential love originates in the self, whereas commanded love originates elsewhere. For Kierkegaard, as well as for Levinas, love-as-responsibility does not originate in need; rather, it is commanded. Need falls into the economy of deficiency, and love is not an attempt to recover from this deficiency. Kierkegaard maintains that love is a perfection, not an attempt to satiate a prior deficiency or lack. The command to love one's neighbor (*Kjerlighed*) is not based in preferentiality. The Other human does not distinguish between me and another when she is in need. Additionally, under the eyes of God, all humans are equal. God loves each and every one of us infinitely, without condition or expectation of adequate response. However, when the human desires for complete equality with another human (i.e. being-in-and-for-itself), this is, as Sartre contends, a useless passion. How can humans possibly love God as much as God loves us?

In the aneconomic works of neighbor-love that we can show to one another, we are in essence imitating (albeit never adequately) the divine. Preferential love, or love that is self-interested, denies the radical equality of humanity by placing one's self over and against her neighbors. In improper love (*Elskov*), one considers oneself an exception, rather than as one should – in relationship. Similarly, love based on preference or inclination is not eternally secured, as feelings of love can easily turn into resentment or hate, based on the changing conditions of one another. M. Jamie Ferreira observes:

It is clear that for Levinas, the attack on self-love is his way of emphasizing the alterity of the other, of precluding a reduction of the other to oneself or an assimilation of the other to the same. Though we might not initially think of Kierkegaard as a champion of the alterity of the other, such a reading of his attack on self-love becomes plausible when we consider in tandem Kierkegaard's and Levinas's shared vehement attack on the variety of ways in which we disguise self-love, on the subtle ways in which we attempt to reduce the other to the self (the same)...Thus, the rationale of Levinas's account alerts us to some deeper commitments that Kierkegaard may share with him; it suggests that it might be possible to read Kierkegaard's emphasis on the infinite debt as similarly in the service of safeguarding the alterity, the irreducibility, of the other.<sup>13</sup>

For Levinas, the face of the Other individual ruptures my attempts at total comprehension, or metaphysical and epistemological totality. For Kierkegaard, the neighbor is that person who I am not, although when understood more fully as a modality of existence, I realize that I am to act

as a neighbor ought. In the Christian Scriptures, the paradigm case for this phenomenon is the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Kierkegaard reminds his beloved readers how to properly become a neighbor to one's fellow human beings.

Alterity, or human otherness, highlights the unsurpassable difference between you and me. There must be an infinite distance separating you and me, or as Levinas would phrase it, the Other stands in a position of height over the self. The Levinasian discovery of radical alterity insures that the self does not attempt to encapsulate or totalize the Other. To do so would be to de-face the other, effectively dehumanizing her. Kierkegaard observes both that (1) it is one's duty to love the people she sees and that (2) it is one's duty to remain in love's debt to one another (*WL*, First Series, IV and V). In terms of the first injunction, Levinas continually observes "Ethics is an optics" (*TI*: 23, 29). This is an oft-cited, yet seldom fully understood, Levinasianism. The "optics" mentioned in this phrase is, along with Kierkegaard's notion, equally visual and non-visual in the sense that my perception does not directly and actively (i.e. intentionally) encounter the ethical situation. On the contrary, the ethical encounter approaches me through the facing of the Other individual, who exists outside the totality of my self-same ego. The face of the Other, as Levinas describes it, is the "gleam of exteriority or of transcendence" (*TI*: 24). If I am to resist the violence and war of ontology, I ought to welcome this Other individual (*Autruï*) qua Other (*autre*) as my neighbor, show her hospitality, and respond accordingly to the face's commanding.

In terms of Kierkegaard's second instruction, Levinas suggests that the more responsible one is toward an Other individual, the more just she is, the more indebted she is to the Other individual. He observes:

The summons [of the face] exalts the singularity precisely because it is addressed to an infinite responsibility. The infinity of responsibility denotes not its actual immensity, but a responsibility increasing in the measure that it is assumed; duties become greater in the measure that they are accomplished. The better I accomplish my duty the fewer rights I have; the more I am just the more guilty I am. (*TI*: 244)

Later, Levinas will restate the above in declaring that "the more I am just, the more I am responsible; one is never quits with regard to the Other....At no time can I say: I have done all my duty" (*EI*: 105). This is a direct invocation of Jewish mitzvot, or personal duty. The punishment for not fulfilling one's mitzvot is another mitzvot – the reward for fulfilling one's mitzvot is another mitzvot. One's responsibility to the Other person

knows no bounds or endpoints. My duty to you does not stop; it is infinite. This concept has direct resonance in *Works of Love*, especially the section “Our Duty to Remain in Love’s Debt to One Another” (First Series, V). Kierkegaard here writes, “[T]his is the distinctive characteristic of love: that the one who loves by giving, infinitely, runs into infinite debt” (WL: 177). There is no point at which one can wash one’s hands of the command to love and say, “OK, now I’m done loving you. My duties to love have been fulfilled. Whew!” Kierkegaard observes, “Love’s element is infinitude, inexhaustibility, immeasurability” (WL: 180). If a situation of one’s duties being fulfilled were to arise, both the Kierkegaardian and Levinasian would admonish the person for quitting on love or shirking one’s infinite responsibility, for turning the task of love-as-response and infinite responsibility into love-as-return or reducing love to the economy of debt and exchange. Love is infinite, all the way up.

The Kierkegaardian and Levinasian correctives to the egoism of self-love heighten the requirements and the stakes for unconditional love of the neighbor. Ferreira adds, “I can only speak from where I stand, from my side. Whatever it looks like from some ‘outside’ perspective, I have only my perspective from the inside; from the inside there is only asymmetry.”<sup>14</sup> Asymmetry is the founding interhuman condition, both for Kierkegaard and Levinas. However, this is not the end of the narrative of human existence.

Now that I have briefly explicated the praxis of ethical alterity and the infinite responsibility that one has for another in Kierkegaard’s terms, a question remains: what responsibilities does the Levinasian Other or Kierkegaardian neighbor have toward me? We have been discussing the love of the neighbor, but what about the neighbor’s commanded love of and for me? As is often dramatized in dramatic relationship films and soap operas, the neglected woman often pleads, and the critic of this Levinasian–Kierkegaardian line of thinking may rightly ask, “What about *my* needs?” Certainly asymmetry or infinite responsibility to the Other cannot be the end of the story, can it? It is to the topic of the radically reconceptualized mutuality, or the seemingly paradoxical notion of the asymmetrical reciprocity of love, that I now turn in the next section of this essay.

### 3.

...asymmetry does not in itself preclude the requirement for response. Asymmetry and alterity may indeed be the first moment. But this moment achieves fulfillment only through the reciprocity of a fitting response. – Calvin O. Schrag<sup>15</sup>

Without a *you* and an *I* there is no love. – Kierkegaard (*WL*: 266)

I love fully only if the Other loves me, not because I need the recognition of the Other, but because my voluptuosity delights in his voluptuosity, and because in this trans-substantiation, the same and the other are not united but precisely – beyond every possible project, beyond every meaning and intelligent power – engender the child. – Levinas (*TI*: 266)

Here I offer a Levinasian perspective of the praxis of asymmetrical reciprocity as it is informed by a reading of *Works of Love*.<sup>16</sup> One may find the Christian requirement of agapic love, as well as the Levinasian (i.e. Judaic) ethic of infinite responsibility, to be self-negating or an exercise of kenotic self-flagellation. What are the Other's (or the neighbor's) duties to me? Am I not supposed to love the neighbor *as myself*? Is my neighbor not supposed to love me as herself, too? These are all valid questions, to which I offer a few responses. Levinas writes that "it is in the interhuman perspective of *my* responsibility for the other without concern for reciprocity in my call for his or her disinterested help, in the asymmetry of the relation of *one* to the *other*" that love is instantiated in the world (*EN*: 101). Real and authentic love requires at least two parties. The following traffic sign renders visible this double-infinity of works of love:



Here we see two arrows, parallel to one another, coming from and pointing to opposite directions. One could imagine the top arrow representing the infinitely asymmetrical directionality, which is commanded from the lover to the beloved. This love is one-directional, unconditional, and not in need of recognition. This work of love does not enter an economic relationship with the Other. This is my infinite duty to you. However, this is not the end of the story, as Kierkegaard, Buber, Levinas, and Schrag remind us. There is a second one-way arrow, extending from the You toward the Me, thus establishing a relationship in the common sense meaning of the term. I am commanded by Torah, God, or the Other individual to love, and so are you. This second infinity is also an aneconomic gift of love. While this activity is none of my concern, as Levinas insists, it is, in effect, your concern. The "cross traffic" of our works of love for one another "does not stop."



The dual asymmetry of love, or the mutuality of ethical love, reenters the lifeworlds of the real world and political economy; however they are qualitatively different than earlier and lesser forms of relationship (e.g. *Elskov* erotic love and friendships, for Kierkegaard). Like Abraham returning from Mount Moriah with his son Isaac, in both the Book of Genesis and Silentio's *Fear and Trembling*, it appears to everyone else that they are father-and-son; however they are father-and-son in a qualitatively different mode of existence than when they made their journey up the mountain. They are now neighbors. Abraham receives Isaac as an Other individual, and not merely as a son and potential sacrificial offering.

For Kierkegaard, all human beings are equal – *under God*. However, within the immanent sociality of humanity, human equality is more precarious of a reality. Note well that there are two senses of “equality” operational here: one is the everyday notion of equality as reciprocity, of which Kierkegaard and Levinas are rightfully suspicious; the second, however, is a “double infinity of unconditional love,” or in Kierkegaard's term, neighbor-love. Kierkegaard worries about the material and ethical conditions that we place on our so-called loving relationships. Agapic love does not enter, as it radically resists, the economy of gift-exchange – it vigorously defies such leveling. Pure love is a freely given gift from one to another on both sides, without expectation of return or the incurring of a debt-status. Levinas reminds us that this position is a regulative ideal, and observes, along with Kierkegaard, that:

No human or interhuman relationship can be enacted outside of economy; no face can be apprehended with empty hands and closed home. Recollection in a home open to the other – hospitality – is the concrete and initial act of human recollection and separation; it coincides with the Desire for the Other absolutely transcendent. (*TI*: 172)

Thus, neighbor-loving human relationships, in an unending effort to escape and transcend economic situations, actually require material conditions. As Levinas points out, however, I ought to be the one offering to you. The self's responsibilities for the Other human do not know a sense of completion – they are always and ever in a state of indebtedness and asymmetry. On this understanding, we can see the beginnings of a radical social-political theory which is critical of the present age which endorses competition and egoisms at every turn.

Ferreira's helpful distinction between reciprocity-as-return and reciprocity-as-response may illuminate our discussion here.<sup>17</sup> For Kierkegaard, the idea and practice of reciprocity-as-return takes the position of

the objects of love as possessions to be bartered at the marketplace. In *Fear and Trembling*, Silentio begins by observing: “Not only in the business world but also in the world of ideas, our age stages *ein wirklicher Ausverkauf* [a real sale]. Everything can be had at such a bargain price that it becomes a question whether there is finally anyone who will make a bid” (FT: 5). For Kierkegaard, agapic love is both invaluable and the most taxing and difficult command to meet. Such love, as Levinas would claim, is a “difficult freedom.” Silentio earlier observed this warehousementality about faith – seemingly everywhere one observes people who proudly wear their symbols of their religious affiliations, yet so few of them actually practice their faiths. As such, faith itself is rendered a bankrupt concept – thus one can find it at a garage sale, and not need to struggle toward inward deepening and religious pathos. This line of argument resounds in the ethical sphere as well. In such a light, we may similarly read the opening line of Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity*: “Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality” (TI: 21). Kierkegaard and Levinas are close in their questions about morality as it has been handed down to us throughout the generations – is this merely a deceptive ruse, a scam? Kierkegaard and Levinas take it upon themselves to raise the stakes for both faith and the ethical, and in so doing, discover (or, more precisely, uncover) the ethico-religious sphere of existence. More will be discussed along this line of thinking in the concluding section of this essay.

To return to Ferreira’s helpful distinction between reciprocity-as-return and reciprocity-as-response, we can extend her analysis of these two concepts to include another distinction, love-as-return and love-as-response. On the one hand, reciprocity-as-return, or love-as-return (*Gjenkjerlighed*) turns agapic love as commanded into a bartering system, or a tit-for-tat morality. This Kantian or Hegelian approach devalues and defaces the infinite obligations that one has for another. To remain in love’s debt is, as mentioned above, not a deficiency, but rather a perfection. On the other hand, reciprocity-as-response or love-as-response maintains attentiveness to the neighbor, to the Other individual. There is, in Kierkegaard’s term, a “heightened inequality” maintaining the separateness of the two, and yet there is an agapic love relationship being observed (WL: 382). Becoming a neighbor means loving the other as much as one loves one’s self in the proper way. This version of love-as-response is vigilant of the dialogical dimension to relationship, requiring openness, honesty, and a desire to listen. While Kant, Kierkegaard, and Levinas are in wholehearted agreement that pathological love (i.e. preferential or inclination-based love) cannot, and should not be commanded, agapic

love-as-response can only be commanded, and expected of us as human beings. Buber's observes, in *I and Thou*, that:

Love is a responsibility of an I for a You: in this consists what cannot consist in any feeling – the equality of lovers, from the smallest to the greatest and from the blissfully secure whose life is circumscribed by the life of one beloved human being to him that is nailed his life long to the cross of the world, capable of what is immense and bold enough to risk it: to love man.<sup>18</sup>

It is in this sense, following Buber and the above visual depiction, that Kierkegaard and Levinas would agree that the asymmetrical dimension of love occurs on two fronts: the side of the lover as well as the side of the beloved, effecting a “double infinity” of asymmetry. Kierkegaard observes:

[T]o be and to remain in an infinite debt is an expression of the infinitude of love; thus by remaining in debt it remains in its element. There is a reciprocal relationship here, but *infinite from both sides*. In the one case, it is the beloved, who in every manifestation of the lover's love lovingly apprehends the *immeasurability*; in the other, it is the lover, who feels the immeasurability because he *acknowledges the debt to infinite....* What marvelous like for like in this infinitude! (*WL*: 181; emphasis added)

Love's humility and humanity are here joined on the other side of common expressions of reciprocity or equality. However, as Buber reminds us, “If I am asked...where one is supposed to find mutuality, I can only point indirectly to certain scarcely describable events in human life where spirit was encountered.”<sup>19</sup> Buber's worry is that unconditional love-as-response, when examined through human eyes, appears as a love-as-return scenario. He is correct to observe that the works of love are often “scarcely describable events in human life,” and it is likewise to put one's finger on moments where “spirit was encountered.” The difference cannot be observed from an external, objective point of view. The qualitative difference is felt in the pathos of the lover in her response to the ethical responsibility for her neighbor, the Other individual. It is precisely here that the human spirit is allowed to emerge, develop, and flourish.

Levinas maintains that “Reciprocity is a structure founded on an original inequality” (*DF*: 22). Notice that he does not dismiss or downplay the importance of reciprocity, mutuality, or interhuman equality. He merely suggests that it is not to be assumed as a condition of human relationships. It is rather the effect of the ethico-religious command to love. Here we can extend Ferreira's analysis of reciprocity-as-return and

reciprocity-as-response to include the larger terms love-as-return and love-as-response. Kierkegaard and Levinas are in favor of the latter over and against the former. In Kierkegaard's case, it is to the commandment to love the neighbor as thyself that one responds, whereas for Levinas, it is to the face of the Other which commands "thou shalt not kill" that one responds.

#### 4.

"Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," or "Thou shalt love thy neighbor, that is what thyself is." – Levinas (*ITN*: 110)

The ethical order does not prepare us for the Divinity; it is the very accession to the Divinity. All the rest is a dream. – Levinas (*DF*: 102)

In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard's consistent returns to the commandment "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" are midrashically appropriated and extended from Judaism's frequent returns to the commandment "thou shalt not kill." These two commandments are in no way opposed to one another; in fact, they are material extensions of one another. To refrain from the ultimate interhuman defacement, murder, is to simultaneously allow for the possibility of positive relationship, i.e. to welcome and bear witness to love. To love the neighbor as one's self in a Kierkegaardian (Christian) sense is to presume a posture of open-handedness and peaceful encounter; thus, the prohibition against murder as discussed in Levinas's Judaism is a prerequisite (i.e. a necessary condition) for agapic love in Kierkegaard's Christianity. This does not effect – and actually resists – a supersessionist rhetoric because Kierkegaard's explicitly Christian understanding of Levinas's Judaic command is to be seen as a material extension of the Hebrew Bible, and not a mere replacement of it. Both positions inform each other and find deeper meaning in their continued relationships.

Levinas contends, in a manner quite resonant with *Works of Love*, that "If to love is to love the love the Beloved bears me, to love is also to love oneself in love, and thus to return to oneself" (*TI*: 266). To love the Other individual, the neighbor, is continuous with the proper love of one's self. This is a radical teaching, a Torah. As some commentators on *Works of Love* have rightly maintained, this text is equally about the love that one is commanded to perform for the neighbor as it is a lesson in proper love of one's self. It is here that the teaching "as yourself" comes to fruition in a proper relation to one's self. The "as yourself" phrase indirectly returns

the love-command to the self. Neither Kierkegaard nor Levinas were in any way opposed to a healthy human subjectivity and individuality; however, they were very much opposed to the atheistic egoisms of improper self-love, reducing the neighbor to a mere image or representation of the self, placing conditions on love (*caritas*), keeping it held fast to the domain of totality. Infinity and transcendence are allowed to penetrate and inform the human individual-in-relation to the Other individual, the neighbor.

To evince an additional anti-supersessionist position, lest we forget, Kierkegaard's "Christian Deliberations in the Form of Discourses" have deep, historical roots in Judaism. Jesus Christ and his earliest followers were practicing Jews. The continuity between Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* and Jewish Law are unmistakable, and my incorporation of Levinas's ethics of infinite responsibility merely adds a contemporary dimension to certain ways of being Jewish in the post-Holocaustal world. Ethics, in Levinas's sense of the term, is first philosophy. Now, "ethics" as Levinas describes it, has much more of an ethico-religious meaning in Kierkegaard, thus maintaining their separation and difference from one another. However, when one reads *Works of Love* from a Levinasian perspective, as has been endeavored here, one discovers the profound connections between the Jewish and Christian faiths. Both religious traditions seek to transform the world simultaneously from the inside out and from the outside in.

As this essay began with a passage from Steinberg, let us allow him to draw this analysis to a close. Steinberg's worries about the alleged anti-intellectualism of Kierkegaard, as well as his mistaken construal of the dichotomy between the ethical and the religious spheres, have been put to rest. And yet Steinberg's larger concern, and our guiding thematic in this paper, has been "nothing less than the timeless dialectical interchange between the Jewish and Christian faiths."<sup>20</sup> I have argued against Steinberg's contention that Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* should be read outside of its *Judeo-Christian* religious and cultural heritage. Additionally, I have argued against Dooley's claim that one is mistaken if one thinks of Kierkegaardian religious ethics in terms of Levinas.<sup>21</sup> Instead, I have highlighted the "timeless dialectical interchange" that Steinberg raised as the stakes for his discussion of "Kierkegaard and Judaism."<sup>22</sup> "The love of God," for Levinas and Kierkegaard, is directly translatable to "the love of one's neighbor" (*ITN*: 171). The commandment to love extends to me and you equally; however, paraphrasing Dostoevsky, from my point of view, I perpetually owe you one more than you owe me.

Where Levinas notes that "Politics must be able...always to be checked and criticized starting from the ethical," I believe that both Levinas and

Kierkegaard would claim that mutuality, or love-as-reciprocity, must always be able to be checked and criticized starting from the infinite asymmetry of love-as-response to commandment (*EI*: 80). Levinas maintains, and Kierkegaard would undoubtedly concur, that “to be free is to do only what no one else can do in my place. To obey the Most-High is to be free” (*BV*: 142). Commanded love is the love that is given most freely, in “blessed independence.” Kierkegaard reminds us, “*Only when it is a duty to love, only then is love eternally made free in blessed independence*” (*WL*: 37). Equality, mutuality, and asymmetrical reciprocity are founded on an original (infinite) inequality, or ethical alterity.

## Notes

1. Milton Steinberg, “Kierkegaard and Judaism,” *The Menorah Journal* 37:2 (1949), 163–164.
2. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Touchstone, 1970), 62.
3. The term “acerbic” is used by Mark Dooley in “The Politics of Statehood vs. A Politics of Exodus: A Critique of Levinas’s Reading of Kierkegaard” *Soren Kierkegaard Newsletter* 40 (August 2000) URL: <http://www.stolaf.edu/collections/kierkegaard/newsletter/issue40/40005.htm>). In this light, I am in agreement with Merold Westphal when he observes that “Levinas is not always a very good reader of Kierkegaard” (“The Many Faces of Levinas as a Reader of Kierkegaard,” *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, Tomo 60 Fasc. 4 (2004): 845–860).
4. See Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (New York: Routledge, 1947); and *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation between Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Humanity Books, 1952); and Emmanuel Levinas, “Existence and Ethics.” Appearing prior to Levinas’s critique of Kierkegaard, and after Buber’s critique, Milton Steinberg fears Kierkegaard’s irrationalism and his violence against the ethical sphere of existence. For Buber, Steinberg, and Levinas, Judaism is an interhuman way of life, deeply rooted in the ethical relationship among human beings. To suggest that one should “teleologically suspend the ethical” would amount to human treason, atheism, and the gravest of violences. As I have contended in previous writings, and as others have observed, this position exhibits a misreading of Kierkegaard’s corpus, especially when we engage his second ethics that appears in *Works of Love*. Westphal’s major concern in the Kierkegaard–Levinas discussion is the directionality of what I will call the rounded triangle of love. Is it the case, as it is for Kierkegaard, that one’s relationship with the neighbor is mediated through her God-relationship? Or is it the case that one’s relationship with God is effected through the status of her relations with the Other? I hope to show, throughout this essay, that setting the situation up in this way leads one to a dead-end, or rather may be a false dilemma (i.e. an unnecessary either/or).
5. The term “jewgreek” is Jacques Derrida’s, and it is meant to highlight the deep connections and lines of influence between the Jewish heritage and the Western philosophical (i.e., Greek) traditions. Mark Dooley is correct to note that “Levinas

- missed what is most essential in Kierkegaard – his *jewgreek* ethics of singularity” (“The Politics of Statehood vs. A Politics of Exodus: A Critique of Levinas’s Reading of Kierkegaard” *Søren Kierkegaard Newsletter* 40 [August 2000]). It will be argued below that Kierkegaard’s ethical sphere of *Sittlichkeit*, as advocated in *Either/Or*, and as teleologically suspended in *Fear and Trembling*, has in no way the same meaning as it does for Levinas’s term “ethical.” Levinas’s “ethical” is more akin to the ethico-religious sphere of religiousness A (generic religiousness), perhaps even religiousness B (Judeo-Christianity), for Kierkegaard.
6. Mark Dooley, *The Politics of Exodus: Kierkegaard’s Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 214–215.
  7. Tikva Frymer-Kensky et al. eds., *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000).
  8. For the purposes of this essay, I am not interested in reading Kierkegaard’s Christianity back into (or outside the context of) Levinas’s Judaism (effecting something resembling a supersessionist position) as some recent commentators have – consciously or unconsciously – attempted. Rather, I am embarking upon a different, and hopefully more faithful, project.
  9. The following sigla will be utilized to refer to Levinas’s writings: *BV*: *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); *CPP*: *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998); *DF*: *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); “EE”: “Existence and Ethics,” *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*. eds. Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers; 1998), pp. 26–38. (Previously published as “Kierkegaard: Existence and Ethics” and “A Propos of ‘Kierkegaard Vivant’” in Levinas, *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 66–79; *EI*: *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985); *EN*: *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); *ITN*: *In the Time of the Nations* trans. Michael B. Smith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); *TI*: *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969); *NTR*: *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); “R”: “Review of Leon Chestov’s *Kierkegaard and the Existential Philosophy*,” *Revue des Etudes Juives* 101 (1937), 139–141. Trans. by James McLachlan. URL: <http://www.angelfire.com/nb/shestov/sk/levinas.html>; *TO*: *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987).
  10. The following sigla will be utilized to refer to Kierkegaard’s writings: *FT*: *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1983); *WL*: *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1995).
  11. It should be noted that Levinas’s thoughts on love change – and I would contend, develop – throughout his writing career. Apparently conflating love with erotic love, Levinas writes: “To love is to exist as through the lover and the beloved were alone in the world. The intersubjective relationship of love is not the beginning, but the end of society....The love of the neighbor depends on chance proximity; it is hence love of one being to the detriment of another, always privilege even if it is not preference. The morality of respect presupposes the morality of love. Love makes

blind the respect which is impossible without blindness toward the third person and is only a pious intention oblivious of the real evil...All love – unless it becomes judgment and justice – is the love of a couple. The couple is a closed society” (*CPP*: 31–32). The reader should bear in mind that this essay, “The Ego and the Totality” (1957), is an early writing. In a 1981 interview with Philippe Nemo, Levinas mentions that is ethics is a “love without eros” (*EI*: 105). Similarly, in a 1975 essay on Gabriel Marcel, Levinas claims that “love, above all, means welcoming the other person as *thou*, that is to say, not empty handed” (*EN*: 63; see also *EN*, ch. 9: “Philosophy, Justice, and Love.”) Additionally, it is the contention of this essay that (Levinas’s) Judaic ethics of responsibility-as-commandment significantly informs Kierkegaard’s thorough exegeses of the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” in *Works of Love*, such that, when read back into Levinas, we can see that what he castigating was not love *per se*; rather, he was critiquing (Kierkegaardian) erotic self-love as “dual egoism” (*TI*: 266). I maintain that the notion and praxis of love-as-commandment saturates both *Works of Love* and Levinas’s *oeuvre*, in no small part due to their proximity to Judeo-Christian heritage. Their religiously radical (or radically religious) challenges to their present ages, in 1840s Denmark and twentieth century French and Jewish culture, also bring them into a fruitful and productive conversation.

12. Here Levinas famously contends that “it is not I who resist the system, as Kierkegaard thought; it is the other” (*TI*: 40). It seems that, in order to be charitable toward both Kierkegaard and Levinas, both the singular existing individual, the I, and the face of the other human individual – the Other – resist the system. This is not necessarily an either-or situation, as proposed by Levinas.
13. M. Jamie Ferreira, *Love’s Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard’s Works of Love* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 127.
14. Ferreira: 217.
15. Calvin O. Schrag, “Response to Contributors,” *Calvin O. Schrag and the Task of Philosophy after Postmodernity*. eds. Martin Beck Matušík and William L. McBride (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 320–321.
16. I first encountered the technical term “asymmetrical reciprocity” in a recent writing by Calvin O. Schrag in Matušík and McBride eds. (2002), so it is initially to him that I owe a debt of gratitude. In a response to one of the 2002 *Festschrift’s* contributors, Schrag observes, “[A]symmetry does not in itself preclude the requirement for response. Asymmetry and alterity may indeed be the first moment. But this moment achieves fulfillment only through the reciprocity of a fitting response” (320–321). It should not go unnoticed that Schrag’s appropriation and mobilization of the term “asymmetrical reciprocity” was itself derived from the recent writings of Luce Irigaray, Iris Marion Young, Patricia J. Huntington, and Drucilla Cornell – all contemporary feminist philosophers. Exploring the feminist dimensions of asymmetrical reciprocity, unfortunately, will be left to a future writing-project, as it is outside of the bounds of the present study.
17. Ferreira (2001): 209–227.
18. Buber (1970): 66–67.
19. Buber (1970): 174. Buber continues, “Every I-You relationship...depends on a mutuality that is condemned never to be complete” (179). Here we are reintroduced to the infinite or asymmetrical dimension of agapic love-as-gift, or in Ferreira’s terms, love-as-response. The “mutuality” of intersubjective equality will “never be



complete” – there is always a remainder, a surplus of responsibility on the part of the I for the Other.

20. Steinberg (1949): 169.
21. In this light, Ferreira is also indirectly critiquing Dooley’s claim. She uses Levinas more times than any other single philosopher, outside of Kierkegaard himself, to help readers understand Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*.
22. Although I cannot develop the following theme within the parameters of this essay, I would like to someday complement this paper on the Judaic influences on Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love* to include a study of the (asymmetrically reciprocal) Kierkegaardian influences in Levinas’s writings (see, for example, Samuel Moyn. “Transcendence, Morality, and History: Emmanuel Levinas and the Discovery of Søren Kierkegaard in France,” *Yale French Studies* 104 [2004]: 22–54). As early as 1937, Levinas had published a “Review of Leon Chestov’s *Kierkegaard and the Existential Philosophy*,” so we are aware that Levinas had made the acquaintance of Kierkegaard’s writings and thought very early in his career. Exploring this topic, as noted above, is unfortunately outside of the scope of the present essay.