

**Self-love front of Christian Love**  
**The Love category in Kierkegaard's book *Works of Love*.**

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**ABSTRACT**

A religious and philosophical treatise called *Works of love* was written by Kierkegaard in 1847 under Kierkegaard's name. It's a Christian book and not pseudonomical writing like his early writings. R. Gregor Smith notes that Kierkegaard's study of love reaches to the heart of Christian thought. Indeed, it discusses the matter of Love in his different senses: self-love, love for the neighbour and love for God. So, it focuses on the relation between the self and the others. In *Works of Love*, he sets up a contrast between the natural loves like erotic love (*Elskov*) and friendship (*Venskab*) on one hand, and the love for God and neighbour on the other hand. There is an evident tension between the different attitudes that Kierkegaard expresses in that writing with regard to preferential love. That why, perhaps, a great critics Løgstrup judges *Works of Love* to be "a brilliantly thought out system of safeguards against being forced into a close relationship with other people<sup>1</sup>".

In this article, I offer a brief account of some Kierkegaard's key concerns about love: its's preferential love and its being a form of self-love. I will discuss the means of preferential love which presents romantic love and friendship. This is, according to Kierkegaard, a real form of selfishness.

Christian love is expressed in the Divine Commandment: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" as Matthew said (22:39), so Kierkegaard shows that "Christian love teaches us to love all people, unconditionally all" (1995, 49). That words "shall" is the "very mark of Christian love" because that love is the duty to love neighbour, any neighbour as one loves oneself. Why does Kierkegaard separate two kinds of love? Is it so different? Preferential love is excluded from the category of neighbourly love because it is understood by the poet. That is to say that preferential love is only showing by the poet way. Therefore, erotic love and friendship aren't dismissed altogether but only as long as they are understood in the pagan way, or more clearly as a poet manner.

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<sup>1</sup> Knud Ejler Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, ed. Hans Fink and Alasdair MacIntyre, trans. Theodor I Jensen and Gary Puckering, University of Notre Dame Press, 1997, p. 232.

Kierkegaard describes three life spheres in an existential perspective: the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. In various spheres, Love is considered as a way of existing. To understand what is Love, it's important to integrate context in his creation because various books mentioned it: *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling* were published in pseudonymous way in 1843: *Either/or* was written by Victor Eremita shows three characters as an aesthete, then a young ethical person - Pseudonymous B- who is opposed aesthetic man called Pseudonymous A, and in last part, the principal focus of the existential approach is a religious life. The reader can identify with each character because Kierkegaard, hiding behind pseudonymous, is "incognito", so in reading about a life of one character, the reader sees how problems arise and like a mirror, his consciousness is reflected in the pseudonymous stories. For example, Johannes de Silentio in *Fear and Trembling* reveals Abraham's love for his son and God in qualitative reflection. The reader can identify himself with Abraham's test which is highly enlightening about Abraham's faith. The literary creation of pseudonymous and stories enable a reader to act with Christian love and to question how he/we are thinking about reality existence. We remark that Johannes de Silentio keeps quiet in order to see God's act of Love towards Abraham: the reflection about pseudonymous communication presents clearly that Love is more than a concept but action, a various ways of being and acting. This is especially true given that Kierkegaard's book of finalization, published in 1847 called *Works of Love*, analyzed what is Love in action, that's why the title said "Works". It's not a definition of love as desire, or passion, or loving thought like idealistic thinking. In other words, if pseudonymous communication reinforces for Kierkegaard the ways of human love like false position between true love and selfish love or ideal passion, the book *Works of Love* was written by Kierkegaard himself, no pseudonymous literary but, as he called, a dialectical paradoxical communication. What is it? He shows that it does not exist a way to pass over the paradox and using Hegelian methodology was a mistake. Because Reality will lead to 'second reality': the first one is the subjectivity, the Existens (*Den Enkelte* from Kierkegaard; *Dasein* from Heidegger) and the second is a transcendent reality which is completely opposed of speculative thought. In *The Repetition*, Kierkegaard had to remind you that the Hegelian logic expressed a mediation between En-soi; Pour-Soi and the synthesis. But, for Kierkegaard, human being have to become what he must be, not just be. That's why Kierkegaard rejected category of determination like: be a philosopher, be a psychologist, be a theologian. His only one mission was to become that subjectivity, processed by the question about "what is to be a Christian?" and so "what is Christian love?".

Now, after this presentation of Kierkegaard context of communication, we need to know first what is a nature of love. Then, reading *Works of Love*, we are interested about a Christian way of love in order to distinguish Love of himself (self-love) to Love for the neighbour. Finally, it is

important to understand that a religious sphere is connected with aesthetic sphere. In this point of view, we cannot think about Christian Love without Love on God. But, to becoming christian is acting like a christian, so we have to understand that Christian Love realized itself in immanence.

## **1. Nature of Love: a phenomenological interpretation**

### 1.1 Love: a subject of faith?

In the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle claims the virtuous person regards a friend as “another self.” (Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics 1166a30–1166a32.) He thereby implies love for one’s friends and for oneself should be more or less symmetrical, similar. A biblical directive seems to be a comparable idea : « love your neighbor as yourself » (Leviticus 19:18). Is it that we love the others and ourselves as the same way ? What is the nature of Love ? In Greek language, we have various words for love. Rehman indicates that « two usages stand out as relevant to the current discussion, namely, the Latin *Deligere* and the Greek *Kenosis* » (p.107). *Deligere* suggests a process of being pleased, a sort of engagement as « the personal, mental quality of human love » (Pieper citation, *ibid*). Regarding *Kenosis*, the greek term refers to God's self-emptying love. Kierkegaard position is middle term in the manner in which Or/Either rewrites a Plato's Symposium to reveals how is experienced the human love. But the *Works of Love* opens to love commandment which Human is placed front of love of God. He asserts, “To love God is to love oneself truly; to help another person to love God is to love another person; to be helped by another person to love God is to be loved.” (SKS 9, 111 / WL, 107. See also SKS 9, 113 / WL, 109. SKS 9, 118 / WL, 114. SKS 9, 124 / WL, 121. See also Evans, Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love, pp. 182–184.)

According to Lippitt, in “True Self-Love and True Self-Sacrifice,” (pp. 127–129; Outka, *Agape*, pp. 56–63.), self-love [*Selvkerlighed*] referred to improper form of Love what we associate usually with selfishness, self-centeredness, and pride. However, when we found God and when we act following a right direction, we will be able to escape from corrupted self-love and love truly the others :

“A person should begin with loving the unseen, God....But that he actually loves the unseen will be known by his loving the brother he sees....If you want to show that your life is intended to serve God, then let it serve people....God does not have a share in existence in such a way that he asks for his share for himself; he asks for everything, but as you bring it to him you immediately receive, if I may put it this way, a notice designating where it should be delivered further, because God does not ask for anything for himself.” (SKS 9, 161 / WL, 160f.; see Jn 21:15–17)

Love consists in helping the person cultivating his or her moral character as well. In this context, *Works of love* opens on paradoxical thought : if « Love's hidden life and its recognizability by its fruits' as indicated in first discourse, it's seems that Love isn't recognizable when we look at it in external point of view. Kierkegaard lack of clarity proposes to question the essence of Love : into internal/external position, Individual man (*Den Enkelte*) may have difficulty speaking to others because words remain necessary because of the need to express love to others. In consequence, Love is not logical demonstration. The fruits of love significates that Love appears through attitude. Kierkegaard argues that the inability to demonstrate love unconditionally does not negate that love is to be known by its fruits. That's why Love is object of faith. Nothing that there is no direct relationship between the fruits of love and the actual effects our love has on others, he points to the fact that the result of love is in the hands of God. He then argues that though fruits of love may be invisible, they become apparent in the strength of our love.

Kierkegaard uses a quotation from the First Letter of John: 'Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and truth' (1 Jn 3:18), meaning that in love we have to distinguish between words and deeds and that the deeds of love take precedence. Accordingly, Kierkegaard compares the words of love with the leaves of a tree. Although words can be a mark of love, they are an uncertain mark, because the same words of love can be trustworthy and nourishing in one person's mouth and sterile and barren like leaves of a tree in someone else's.

### 1.2 Self-Love and egoïsm

In *The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage*, Judge William argues that lovers feel as if they are soul mates and the marriage furfills the promise of erotic love, making an eternal commandment. By ethical relationship in which lover's said "you shall love one another until the death", the marriage become a commitment preserving love during time while eternity. Kierkegaard shows also that Judge William do not refuse erotic love as a sensual impetus but, he seems to show that erotic love, like poets, depend on idealism form, such a romantic reflexion. Thus, the other loved is not yet "a soul mate" but just a concept which is enable Love to become possible. That's clear that erotic love as a first definition of self-love is defined by Kierkegaard in *Works of Love* as "a blind love" because, the lover has been overshadow the relationship to the other who is transmuted into object of ephemeral love. In this relation between two lovers, the other is not a representation of authentic love. He uses erotic love to depict the lack of consciousness when the individual man takes the woman as an inauthentic relationship. Martin BUBER clarifies that position loving blindly:

“As long as love is 'blind'- that is, as long as it does not see a whole being – it does not yet truly stand under the basic word of relation. Hatred remains blind by its very nature; one can hate only part of a being” (67-8).

« Tant que l’amour est « aveugle » c’est-à-dire tant qu’il ne voit pas *l’intégralité* d’un être, c’est qu’il n’est pas véritablement soumis au mot-principe de la relation.” (Martin Buber, *Je et Tu*, In *La vie en dialogue*, trad. Jean Loewenson-Lavi, Ed. Montaigne, Paris, 1959, p. 17.)

The main reproach made against a character “aesthetic A” is the fact that he had the advantage of rendering the moment poetic: love in this way is poetic, idealisation of life whereas the real life is to conquer time by the power of ethical relationship, so into marriage. In response to our question about “how can we access to a self awareness in terms of love authenticity?”, we have to be careful to not fall into aesthetic tendencies: One, sensual enjoyment illustrates a Man (Individual man) who looks at himself, forgetting the Others and, who his selfish love could be a manipulation. Two, the aesthetic life defines a love as a pure passion because sensibility can be negated by the process of idealism. By this two tendencies, a man moves away the love *in concreto* whereas it should be his task of existence. But, changing his attitude and making a difference, understanding how aesthetic sphere of existence can lead him to despair<sup>2</sup> affords the solution in such case. *Works of Love* remember us that marriage (ethical sphere) was a bridge to the religious sphere and that Love *in concreto* depends on Love commandment: how can we access to a self-awareness? We become truly what we have to do, to love friends, love family when we live God's love as human being in authentic relationship with Others and Ourselves:

“Yet it remains firm that love is to be known by its fruits. But those sacred words of that text are not said to encourage us to get busy judging one another; they are rather spoken admonishingly to the single individual, to you, my listener, and to me, to encourage him not to allow his love to become unfruitful but to work so that it could be known by its fruits, whether or not these come to be known by others.” ((Kierkegaard 1995:14) Kierkegaard, S., 1995, *Works of love: Some Christian deliberations in the form of discourses*, transl. and eds. H.V. Hong & E.H. Hong, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ

That love is called as love of Neighbour. Nevertheless, the concept of neighbour leads to a philosophical revolution: according to Kierkegaard, it's a new concept because paganism didn't think like this but the origin date back to Christian thought:

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2 « The poet and Christianity give explanations which are quite opposed, or more accurately expressed, the poet really explains nothing, for he explains love and friendships- in riddles. He explains love and friendship as riddles, but christianity explains love eternal. » *Works of love* p.63.

“To love the beloved, asks Christianity-is that loving and adds, 'Do not the pagans do likewise?' If because of this someone thinks that the difference between Christianity and paganism is that in Christianity the beloved and the friend are loved with an entirely different tenderness and fidelity than in paganism, he misunderstands [...]. But no one in paganism loved his neighbour- no one suspected that there was such a being. Therefore, what paganism called love, in contrast to self-love, was preference”. (*Works of Love*, “You shall love your neighbour, p.67)

Christian love does presuppose that self-love should be a measuring instrument of Love and its obstacle too:

- His obstacle in the manner in which Christian Love is fighting selfishness depending on natural love.
- His measure/A measuring instrument of love in the manner in which loving a neighbour more than himself is a lie.

According to Heiko Schulz and Jon Stewart, “He first and foremost recommends adopting an optimistic attitude: We ought to believe the best about people<sup>3</sup>.” (p.201) but echoing to Evangel, Mathieu 22,39 : “you shall love your neighbour as yourself”, Kierkegaard remarks that if we said that loving other more than myself is poetic passion, loving your neighbour as yourself is to say “he is or shall be exactly as near to me”. If the expression “as myself/as yourself” is taken literally, Love is a synonym of selfishness, self-sufficiency as notes French critic, Alain Cugno:

“Pretend to love someone more than myself, is, despite the appearance, falling to selfishness love of myself- but loving other as much as we loved each other, it is a true love, authentic love for other and self-love, and it do not exist a love more stronger”

Prétendre aimer quelqu'un plus que soi-même, c'est, malgré les apparences, tomber dans un amour égoïste de soi-même – alors qu'aimer l'autre autant que l'on s'aime, c'est le véritable amour et de l'autre et de soi, et il n'en existe pas de plus fort<sup>4</sup>.”

But becoming near to myself, the subjectivity moves away from the other, the beloved. In Kierkegaard though, it's important to keep in mind that the subjectivity, the *Self*, is one who experienced that love of neighbour. Adorno reminds you that “the love

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<sup>3</sup> [Self-Love and Neighbor-Love in Kierkegaard's Ethics Publishers PDF.pdf \(nmu.edu\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> Cugno, A. (2012). Kierkegaard, les paradoxes de l'amour. *Études*, 6(6), 771-782. <https://doi.org/10.3917/etu.4166.0771>

become for Kierkegaard the quality of the pure interiority<sup>5</sup>". So, in Christian, love, there is no selfishness because of the self could be alone/ solitary.

In this context, it's seems that in relationship with other (neighbour?), we can ensure that have contact with other is an authentic way of life. Is it why Kierkegaard mentioned it as requirement: from the self-love to love of the others (friend, family, beloved), the other enforces, in Christianity, a natural Princip then, a duty "you must love yourself in an honest manner". Christian love shows ultimately that the Self has to be suspicious in front of loving solipsism and that he should try to deal with its risk to overcome the danger and, finally, to be in deep relationship with "neighbour".

## **2. A love for the neighbour.**

### **2.1 Who is the neighbour?**

The main question is to know if there is someone in the love relationship. According to Martin Buber, (Martin Buber, « Limitation » In *La vie en dialogue*, op.cit, p. 127.) Kierkegaard separated the close (opposite to distant) and the neighbour . But, the neighbour could it be a closer to me ? Spatially, a neighbour is the more closer to me but not so close that self-love. In other words, neighbour is distant in order to « move towards » the neighbour : so, it will be close as myself. A neighbour, consequently, is the close-distanced, that means that the neighbour seems to be who I am looking for over the horizon, I am moving towards him and when I am joining him, at the same time he moves away. In this context, Buber said that the neighbour is one who is connecting to me. Kierkegaard too concluded that "*Who, then, is one's neighbor?* The word is clearly derived from *neahgebur* [near-dweller]; consequently your neighbor is he who dwells nearer than anyone else, yet not in the sense of partiality, for to love him who through favoritism is nearer to you than all others is self-love—"Do not the heathens also do the same?" [Matt. 5.46f.] ...The concept of *neighbor* really means a duplicating of one's own self " ([Kierkegaard, D. Anthony Storm's Commentary on - Works Of Love \(sorenkierkegaard.org\)](#) p. 37). To understand better, it's important to understand the words « other » : Others, in semantic features, is an undefined substantive/noun which do not represents an human being in real (as we said in spanish « cualcuno) whereas the neighbour is one in front of me and is waiting an answer (the root of the words « responsibility » in spanish « responsabilidad » is related to « respuesta » Answer). When we look at Kierkegaard's *Books of Love*, Others is near to Humanity, as global human being putting together.

5 « *l'amour devient pour Kierkegaard la qualité de la pure intériorité* » (T.W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard. Construction de l'esthétique*, traduction d'Eliane Escoubas, Payot, Paris, 1995, p. 53.)

But, in hindsight, the single individual as « I » can't be in front of the entire Humanity because it is an abstraction, too big for give an answer. Humanity by essence is exceeded me, by its forms. So I can't be related to/ connected to Humanity but, with a You, a single one, I can as note Martin Buber.

## 2.2 How to distinguish Authentic Love and Self-Love?

At the beginning of the second chapter, Meditation writing, the commandment “of Christ “You shall love” was analysed by Kierkegaard as an ironical method: Kierkegaard critics philosophers and also Christian’s attitude in his time. As Andrès R. Albertsen reminds it, everyone thinks to know what is Self-love but nobody is telling how can we loved Others! If I don’t know myself (following Socrative’s reflection), and I don’t love myself like I have to do, Love for the Others will be a lie to me and Others. In other words, Christian Love promotes “Love for neighbour as myself” as an authentic relationship: neighbour is thus more than a concept. It is a reduplication (repetition) of your own self.

If I loved Others more than myself, I have committed *blasphemy* because I loved Others more than God. For example, when the beloved want to break down the relationship, I have to respect his choice and accept. Here Kierkegaard formulates love’s basic principle: in love we belong to the other. When the other really moves us from within, then we owe it to the other to express this emotion, because, in this, we are immediately moved by God, who is the hidden source of our love :

« The result of love is not in our hands but in the hands of God. The only responsibility we have is to love and to believe that this love, because of its divine origin, is fruitful in itself, whatever this may mean. » (Jos Huls, *Love founded in God : The Fruits of love in Kierkegaard’s Works of love*, p. 7).

In this way, it’s clear that Christian (person) do not have to know who is a neighbour but how he can be himself the neighbour of the others. Kierkegaard introduced a commentary about parable of Good Samaritan:

It is in fact Christian love which discovers and knows that one's neighbor exists and that—it is one and the same thing—everyone is one's neighbor. If it were not a duty to love, then there would be no concept of neighbor at all. But only when one loves his neighbor, only then is the selfishness or preferential love rooted out and the equality of the eternal preserved (p. 58).

The parable makes a response about Love of neighbour: it enables me to become a real I. Christ wanted that every person could become “neighbour” of someone to experience what it look like to live in authenticity. Christianity ignores distinctions and loves without distinction, all the



while valuing the uniqueness of the individual. In this sense, P. Chevalier notes that “ Works of Love indeed strives for being devoid of his substance the other, in order to let Love be his proper reference. Christian Love is defined as a circular movement between Neighbour and God.

### **3. Non preferential love and God: Love of God and God's love.**

#### **3.1 Buber, reader and critic against S.Kierkegaard**

As Arno Münster notes, “this though of relationship will peak in Martin Buber thesis, that is “someons talks to You with his entire heart, he is talking to God too” ( « cette pensée de la relation culminera chez Martin Buber, dans la thèse que « quiconque s’adresse avec son être entier au Tu de la vie, s’adresse aussi à Dieu” (Arno Münster, *Le principe dialogique, De la réflexion monologique vers la pro-flexion intersubjective*, Ed. Kimé, Paris, 1997, p. 17.)).

Buber reproaches Kierkegaard for breaking his relation with Regine Olsen in order to love<sup>6</sup> . According to Buber, the relationship between I and God cannot happen at the detriment of the relationship between I and You, thus against the real experienced relation with other people around Me. So, the breakup with his girlfriend is for Buber a fact which enables Kierkegaard to “acknowledging God the most sublimely”. Indeed, Buber thinks that Kierkegaard has rejected the sensible world, has denied the relationship with a real human being (Regine Olsen), and moreover, it's a reason why Kierkegaard loosed his relation with God. Because “creatures are been standing on my road, (...) so that I can fin God through them and with them”. (« les créatures ont été placées sur mon chemin pour que, créature comme elles et participant à leur existence, je trouve Dieu à travers elles et avec elles<sup>7</sup> »).

But I think that Buber makes a mistake beacause Kierkegaard do not love God more than human being. In his life like in *The Repetition*, he argues that a Young Man in esthetic sphere belonged to esthetic love: the Seducer found pleasur in the moment and wanted to escape from the consequence of love. At this time, Kierkegaard, as a Young Man in Constantin Constantius Writing knows that he must transform his selfish erotic love to eternal love:

“When a person in the infinite transformation discovers the eternal iself so close to life that is not the distance of one single claim, of one single evasion, of one single excuse, of one single moment of time from what *he* in this instant, in this second, in this holy moment shall do- then he is on the way to becoming a Christian” (WL, 90).

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6 Martin Buber, *La question qui se pose à l’individu*, In *La vie en dialogue*, op.cit, p. 164.

7 *Ibid.*

### 3.2- Where is God?

Kierkegaard is clear about that God is the middle term in proper erotic love between wife and husband. Their love may be transformed into self denial's unselfishness. In other words, erotic love abides between lover and beloved through unselfish Christian love, loving God first. Indeed, Christian love loves God, who needs nothing and loves us solely because he is love. Thus, since love is defined by God in Christ as the fulfiller of the law, then all love must center on God, as the One who personified love :

Christianity teaches that love is a relationship between: man-God-man, that is, that God is the middle term. However beautiful the love-relationship has been between two or more people, however complete all their enjoyment and all their bliss in mutual devotion and affection have been for them, even if all men have praised their relationship—if God and the relationship to God have been left out, then, Christianly understood, this has not been love but a mutual and enchanting illusion of love. For to love God is to love oneself in truth; to help another human being to love God is to love another man; to be helped by another human being to love God is to be loved (p. 112).

True love comes from God, and is offered back to God who perfects it. With Kierkegaard's conception of Christian love is his interpretation of self-denial.

The purely human conception of self-renunciation is this: give up your selfish desires, longings and plans—and then you will become appreciated and honored and loved as a righteous man and wise.... The Christian conception of self-renunciation is this: give up your selfish desires and longings, give up your arbitrary plans and purposes so that you in truth work disinterestedly for the good—and submit to being abominated almost as a criminal, scorned and ridiculed for this very reason...but choose it freely (p. 188).

Loving God is to desire the best that you can't imagine. Because I am in connexion with God to find ethical turn in Bible interpretation like analogy. Like a bridge in two direction, God is related to Human and Human to God. You have to move into yourself to find this Love. Indeed, Love for God is like a communion because you have to desire something good.

## Conclusion

In *Works of love*, true love lives in a paradox between two forms of love: a preferential love is “joy of life” (WL, 150) and, preferential love of the neighbour is one of the concrete realisation of the human love: charity for example. It is not to remplace preferential love between beloved. This point is important because love of neighbour is by definition equal, as non preferential whereas erotic love is preferential like “the *only one* who I loved”. So, this first reflection seems to reveal a contradiction but, according to Antony Aumann, since preferential love amounts to self-love and non-preferential love to neighborly love, is to say that one must love preferentially as well as non-preferentially. True love is both preferential and non-preferential love and God as middle term is who the lover must love and through Him, the lover is near the beloved. Indeed, the Love of God and the Love for God are the basis of beeing “a singular” (*Den Enkelte*): God as a middle term defines the love in faith and a reduplication.