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# THE ENACTMENT OF LOVE BY FAITH: ON KIERKEGAARD'S DISTINCTION BETWEEN LOVE AND ITS WORKS

Sharon Krishek

The aim of this paper is to throw light on Kierkegaard's neglected distinction between love and its *works*, and by doing so to resolve the ambivalence in his position with regard to preferential love in *Works of Love*. In this text Kierkegaard seems to fail to reconcile his insistence on neighbourly love's demand for equality and self-denial, with his wish to affirm the centrality of preferential love to human existence. My claim is that neighbourly love and preferential love are two distinct *works* of love that share the double structure of faith. This paradoxical structure, presented and discussed by Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*, allows the two loves to be realized together, without requiring any compromise regarding their respective demands.

## 1. *The Intriguing Distinction between Love and Its Works*

Søren Kierkegaard, who was well attuned to the nuances of words, decided to call his important religious treatise on love *Works of Love*. This decision demands our attention: why *works* of love? What does he mean by *works* and what is the difference between love and *works* of love? Kierkegaard himself does not explain this distinction, but only says that the deliberations in this book "are *Christian deliberations*, therefore not about *love* but about *works of love*."<sup>1</sup> He repeats this statement twice (at the preface to each of the two series of deliberations), but elaborates no further on this idea.

In recent years a growing interest in *Works of Love* has emerged and various aspects of the book have been widely discussed in several contexts. However, despite its apparent centrality, Kierkegaard's decision to distinguish between love and works of love has not received much attention, possibly because on the face of it there seems to be nothing striking about it. This distinction may simply be understood as implying that Kierkegaard does not wish to focus on what love is commonly taken to be—a vague, elusive, unpredictable feeling which is the subject of poetry (according to *Works of Love*)—but rather on a special kind of action, for which we are responsible and with regard to which we are dutiful: namely, the *work* of love. M. Jamie Ferreira, a prominent interpreter of *Works*

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<sup>1</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (hereafter WL), trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 3, emphasis in the text. References to WL will henceforth appear in the main text.



of *Love*, emphasizes that by “works” Kierkegaard does not allude to (nor does he challenge) the Lutheran distinction between works and grace; the Danish word translated as “works,” she says, “simply means ‘deeds’ or ‘acts,’ with no connotations of the question of ‘merit’ that Luther associated with “works-righteousness.”<sup>2</sup> She also mentions that another interpreter of *Works of Love*, Martin Andic, suggests that we understand the distinction between *love* and *works* as implying a differentiation between God’s love and our works of love, or as one between our love for God and our love for the neighbour.<sup>3</sup> Thus, despite presenting this distinction, Kierkegaard’s interpreters—just like Kierkegaard himself—seem to abandon it quite quickly and use “love” and “works of love” synonymously (and therefore interchangeably), without endowing the difference between the two concepts with too much significance.

Against this background, the claim of the present paper is that we need to pay greater attention to this neglected Kierkegaardian distinction, and for two reasons. First, the distinction between “love” and “works of love” implies an interesting and productive understanding of love and is thus, arguably, more meaningful than it is usually taken to be. Second, and more crucially, in accordance with the understanding of love emerging from it, this distinction, I claim, holds the key to untangling a complexity at the centre of *Works of Love*, namely, Kierkegaard’s ambivalent position with regard to preferential love (such as romantic love and friendship).<sup>4</sup> But before addressing this problem, let us begin by looking closely at the understanding of love implied by the distinction between love and its works.

In the first deliberation Kierkegaard presents quite a picturesque description of love that supports this distinction and provides us with the tools for understanding what it might mean.

There is a place in a person’s innermost being; from this place flows the life of love, for “from the heart flows life.” But you cannot see this place; however deeply you penetrate, the origin eludes you in remoteness and hiddenness. (WL, pp. 8–9)

Kierkegaard clearly distinguishes between a hidden origin of love and that which manifestly flows from it. The origin is like a mysterious elemental power (or drive) within us: unfathomable and impalpable, undoubtedly present but essentially elusive. And he continues:

Just as the quiet lake originates darkly in the deep spring, so a human being’s love originates mysteriously in God’s love. Just as the quiet lake invites

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<sup>2</sup>M. Jamie Ferreira, *Love’s Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard’s Works of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 11.

<sup>3</sup>See *Ibid.*, p. 17, n. 18.

<sup>4</sup>I offer a brief presentation of this ambivalence below (see section 3). For a more elaborate discussion of this problem, as well as a critical presentation of some recent interpretative attempts to address it, see my “Two Forms of Love: The Problem of Preferential Love in Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 36.4 (2008), pp. 595–617. See in this regard also John Lippitt, “Cracking the Mirror: on Kierkegaard’s Concerns about Friendship,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 61.3 (2007), pp. 131–150.

you to contemplate it but by the reflected image of darkness prevents you from seeing through it, so also the mysterious origin of love in God's love prevents you from seeing its ground. (WL, p. 10)

Looking at these two quotations together, while remembering the title of the deliberation from which they are taken—namely, “Love’s Hidden Life and Its Recognizability by Its Fruits”—we can suggest that here Kierkegaard depicts a picture that implicitly presents four layers of love: 1. The ultimate origin of every love (“a human being’s love originates mysteriously in God’s love”); 2. The hidden origin of love within ourselves (“There is a place in a person’s *innermost being*; from this place flows the life of love”); 3. The works of love (the manifested “flow,” or “the lake,” which gives shape to the hidden origin); and 4. The fruits of love (the discernible side of the works, by which they can become visible or “recognizable”). What does this mean?

The deepest layer and the ultimate origin of all love is God’s love, which obviously transcends us but is also, mysteriously and intriguingly, within us. Kierkegaard says little about the metaphysical character of this interesting aspect of love (namely, on the relation between the love which is outside ourselves and the love which is within us), but it is clear that he takes love to be a fundamental entity (as it were): not a mere feeling, not a relationship between two, but rather a “third” that “abides.” “One would think,” he says,

that love between human beings is a relationship between two. This is indeed true, but untrue, inasmuch as this relationship is also a relationship among three. First there is the one who loves, next the one or the ones who are the object; but *love itself is present as the third*. (WL, p. 301, my emphasis)

It is not the task of the present paper to analyze the meaning of love as such an “entity” which is present and abiding, or to suggest a Kierkegaardian interpretation regarding the fundamental theological idea that “God is Love.” Rather, I suggest that we take these statements as implying that the love “within us” is first and foremost an elemental “power” (i.e., something essential to our human nature that drives us to act) which is implanted in us—like a divine “watermark” (WL, p. 89)<sup>5</sup>—by God.<sup>6</sup> This primordial power is the origin of every act, manifestation, and experience of love—I therefore suggest that we think of it in terms of “love itself.”<sup>7</sup> This love is hidden: it is hidden both in its being a divine and unfathom-

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<sup>5</sup>Kierkegaard uses this metaphor in a different connection, but I think it is helpful to use it here also.

<sup>6</sup>See Ferreira’s “The Problematic Agapeistic Ideal—Again,” in *Ethics, Love, and Faith in Kierkegaard: Philosophical Engagements*, ed. E. F. Mooney (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), where she explains that Kierkegaard uses the term “love” not only to refer to neighbourly love but also to “God as love,” and to “the love placed in us by God” (p. 107).

<sup>7</sup>Kierkegaard uses the Danish word *Kjerlighed*, which can simply be understood as “caring” (see Ferreira, *Love’s Grateful Striving*, p. 43 and Ferreira, “The Problematic Agapeistic Ideal,” p. 106). I will return to this term (“caring”) and suggest a possible reasoning for choosing it, in the last section of this paper.

able mystery, and in its being mysteriously implanted in us, in our “innermost being.” Accordingly, Kierkegaard does not wish to elaborate on this power, on this hidden mystery. He says specifically: “in this little work we are continually dealing only with the works of love, and therefore not with God’s love but with human love” (WL, p. 301). Thus, while the first layer of love is God’s love, which in its abiding power within us constitutes the second layer of love (*love itself*), the third layer is the human *works of love*. While *love itself* is hidden and inaccessible, the *works of love* are the way in which love becomes manifested in the world. Each work enacts love and gives it shape: the hidden, primordial ‘power of love’ is actualized through the work of love.

Now, it is important to emphasize that even though the works of love are the manifestation of love in the world (they are “the quiet lake” mentioned above), they are not necessarily discerned or recognized. Here the fourth layer of love—the fruits—becomes relevant. The word “fruit” in this context stands both for something visible and indicative of the “tree” which bears it (“Every tree is known by its own fruit”)<sup>8</sup>, and for the successful, *fruitful*, results of an action. Of course, the fruit—even in its being the potentially visible, discernible side of the work of love—does not always show itself outwardly (such as the fruit carried by the work of thinking good thoughts about someone who offended you, for example). And sometimes there is a genuine work that ends with unsuccessful results (for example, one may give money to charity and yet this money is wasted or lost or ineptly handled, so that the money does not benefit the poor for whom it was given). However, it seems that Kierkegaard’s insistence on adding this further distinction (between “works” and “fruits”) is intended to emphasize that the work of love is *essentially* discernible: it in essence bears fruit which make the work of love *recognizable*, even if this fruit is not always actually *recognized*<sup>9</sup> (either due to the inwardness of the work, or due to external obstacles that hinder a successful result). At the same time, naming his treatise on love “*works of love*” indicates, I suggest, that Kierkegaard is interested neither in fathoming the hidden origin of love, nor in exploring the way it can be recognized by its fruits. Rather, he is interested in the work, in the action: in that which determines an existential attitude as a work of love. What is it, then, that constitutes an action, a work, as a *work of love*?

There are, of course, works that in a particular sense are called works of love. But even giving to charity, visiting the widow, and clothing the naked do not truly demonstrate or make known a person’s love, inasmuch as one can do works of love in an unloving, yes, even in a self-loving way, and if this is so the work of love is no work of love at all. (WL, p. 13)

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<sup>8</sup>Luke 6:44. Kierkegaard quotes this verse in order to demonstrate the point regarding the recognizability of love.

<sup>9</sup>Ferreira helpfully emphasizes this point in her discussion of the fruits of love (see Ferreira, *Love’s Grateful Striving*, p. 24).

Actions that are traditionally taken to be works of love—such as giving to charity, visiting the widow, and clothing the naked—do not capture the essence of the work of love. In other words, these concrete actions do not suffice, in themselves, to explain what a work of love actually means. The crucial thing about the work of love, Kierkegaard says, is “*how* the work is done” (WL, p. 13, emphasis in text). In a way, the entirety of *Works of Love* can be seen as an attempt to describe this “*how*,” and in a sense the answer is, ultimately, “by way of self-denial”: the work of love is a *work of love* when it is carried out and performed in self-denial (which secures the love from being merely a disguised form of self-love).<sup>10</sup>

However, in this paper I would like to offer an alternative account, which relies on a different, and earlier, Kierkegaardian text.<sup>11</sup> “It depends on *how* the work is done”—and my suggestion is that the way by which the work of love should be “done” is that of *Fear and Trembling*’s double movement of faith. In the following section I will therefore discuss the structure of faith, and in the last section of the paper I will show how this structure is relevant for an understanding of the *work* of love. Only then will we be in the position to understand the more crucial reason for taking the distinction between love and its works seriously (see again p. 2 above). I hope to show how in the light of this distinction, the understanding of the work of love as structured by the double movement of faith helps to present a more coherent reading of Kierkegaard’s position with regard to the legitimacy and value of preferential love. Interestingly enough, preferential forms of love—such as the parental love of a father for a son or a romantic love of a young man for his princess—are the focus of Kierkegaard’s exploration of faith in *Fear and Trembling*. This, as we shall see, is not accidental and it makes the philosophical affinity between *Fear and Trembling* and *Works of Love* more essential than it might at first appear.

## 2. The Paradoxical Structure of Faith

According to *Fear and Trembling* a conspicuous characteristic of faith is its paradoxical structure, involving a “double movement.” Kierkegaard describes faith as an existential position that contains, simultaneously, two ways of understanding the world and acting in it—he calls them “movements”—which seem to contradict each other: resignation and faith. This seemingly contradictory combination of the two movements is most clearly demonstrated by the biblical story of Abraham, the father of faith. His willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac (in resignation), while at the same time believing that he will receive Isaac back (in faith) is according to *Fear and Trembling*

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, “Christian love is self-denial’s love” (WL, p. 52); “To love the neighbor . . . is self-denial’s love” (WL, p. 55).

<sup>11</sup>The text is *Fear and Trembling*, and unlike *Works of Love* it is signed pseudonymously (by Johannes de Silentio). It is not my intention here to discuss Kierkegaard’s decision to relate this text to Johannes de Silentio, or to address the interpretative debate regarding the status of the pseudonymous texts in the philosophy of Kierkegaard. For the purpose of the present essay, the fact that Kierkegaard acknowledged that he was the author of *Fear and Trembling* is enough to attribute the ideas expressed there to him.

the hallmark of faith and the ultimate expression of its essence. The story of Abraham also captures the difficulty of faith and its paradox: how could Abraham raise the knife above his son's neck and at the same time believe that the living Isaac will continue to be a part of his life on earth? To understand the profundity of Abraham's position (and thus of the life of faith), we need to begin by exploring the movement of resignation.

Kierkegaard presents the movement of resignation by introducing the unhappy love story of a young man. "A young lad falls in love with a princess, and this love is the entire substance of his life," he tells us, "and yet the relation is such that it cannot possibly be realized."<sup>12</sup> However, despite the advice to devote himself to a different woman (instead of the unachievable princess), "[t]he knight of infinite resignation does not do any such thing; he does not give up the love, not for all the glories of the world" (FT, p. 42). What *does* he do, then? It is important to understand that the movement of resignation follows an uneasy process of self-examination and a determined assessment of one's situation. The knight of resignation is neither a coward nor a spiritually lazy person who uses resignation as an escape from a difficult reality. Rather, he is someone entirely immersed in his love for the princess, and absolutely focused on his will to fulfil his love for her. At the same time, however, he honestly understands that this love is a real impossibility: having uncompromisingly enquired into all the possibilities that are open before him, the knight painfully concludes that the relationship cannot be realized. Moreover, he understands that this impossibility complies with God's will, and thus in his *resignation* he submits his own will to that of God. This is obviously painful, but the movement of resignation is also an act of reconciliation:

[I]n infinite resignation he is reconciled with existence. His love for that princess would become for him the expression of an eternal love, would assume a religious character, would be transfigured into a love of the eternal being, which true enough denied the fulfilment but nevertheless did reconcile him once more in the eternal consciousness of its validity in an eternal form that no actuality can take away from him. (FT, pp. 43–44)

The young man understands that it was the "eternal being" that "denied the fulfilment" of his love for the princess but in his knighthood this recognition (of God's will) does not make him bitter or angry or rebellious against God. Rather, he responds by *loving* God. This somewhat enigmatic account of the young man's transformation may lead to interpreting resignation in terms of an act of sublimation, in the context of which the knight substitutes his love for a human being with a love for God. However, from here the distance to understanding resignation as basically a problematic and unwelcome position is quite short, and indeed this is how it is frequently understood. Resignation is taken to represent a negative position

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<sup>12</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (hereafter FT), trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 41. References to FT will henceforth appear in the main text.



of indifference to the temporal world and detachment from it, a negative movement that one should overcome by faith.<sup>13</sup>

By contrast, my claim is that the movement of resignation is a *positive* position, the undertaking of which is an indispensable condition for faith. It is true that this movement is expressed and tested in the ability of the knight to renounce any hope and expectations with regard to finitude, and indeed from this point of view it does not matter to him whether the princess has married another or not (see FT, p. 44). However, this does not mean that the knight no longer loves the princess, or that he is not suffering over her loss. Rather than being considered as indifferent and detached as he is often described, I suggest that a more accurate understanding of the knight would consider him as one who is deeply *attached* to finitude by bonds of pain.

First, conceptually speaking, resignation can be defined as *resignation* only as long as the object of resignation is desired by the one who renounces it. One does not *renounce* something which one does not *want*. "Resignation" implies that an external force, *distinct from one's will*, is the cause of the renunciation: one does not become indifferent but, rather, is forced to renounce that which one wants. It is important to notice that for the knight, resignation is a continuous state and not merely an initial phase that ceases after a while. The knight, therefore, *keeps renouncing* that which he wants, and accordingly he must *keep desiring* the object of his renunciation (otherwise, again, it would have been a conceptual mistake to describe it as a renunciation). "The knight does not cancel his resignation," Kierkegaard says, "he keeps his love just as young as it was in the first moment" (FT, p. 44).

Second, Kierkegaard could not be more specific with regard to the essential connection between resignation, knighthood, and desire. The knight of resignation is anything but indifferent or unloving:

And yet, I repeatedly say, it must be wonderful to get the princess. The knight of resignation who does not say this is a deceiver; he has not one single desire, and he has not kept his desire young in his pain. There may be someone who found it quite convenient that the desire was no longer alive and that the arrow of pain had grown dull, but such a person is no knight. (FT, p. 50)

The knight of resignation does not abandon or nullify his desire, and does not become emotionally detached from finitude. He keeps his desire "young" while wholeheartedly accepting the impossibility of fulfilling it.

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<sup>13</sup>See, for example, Edward F. Mooney's influential interpretation of the double movement in his *Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1991), and Ronald L. Hall's response to Mooney's specific understanding of faith in his *The Human Embrace: The Love of Philosophy and the Philosophy of Love: Kierkegaard, Cavell, Nussbaum* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000). I discuss the strengths and weaknesses of these two important interpretations at length in my *Kierkegaard on Faith and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).



And this is, clearly, a very difficult combination: the knight of resignation is immersed in deep pain over his unfulfilled desire.

At the same time, the knight is reconciled to his existence. He is as hurt as can be, but peaceful: he reposes in his love for God, and draws his strength and happiness from this relationship. Resignation is therefore a complex interplay of contradictory desires. Resignation, we said, is a movement that the knight undertakes only after having clarified his strong desire for some *x*, and only after his realization that this *x* is a real impossibility for him. Thus, his inability to attain a love relationship (for example), *notwithstanding his efforts*, reveals that its non-fulfilment is in accordance with God's will (he realizes, as we have seen above, that it was the eternal being that "denied the fulfilment"). Responding to this understanding in resignation means precisely that the knight, without forgetting or abandoning his desire, accepts with love the will of God. His position is therefore an intriguing one: he does not *substitute* one love, or desire, for another. He does not love God instead of the princess, or at the expense of his love for the princess, or as compensation for the loss of the princess; he does not replace his desire for a relationship with the finite princess with his desire to obey God. Rather, he submits himself, and his worldly desire, to the will of God.

It is only against the background of the unique position of resignation with regard to finitude that *faith* becomes relevant:

Temporality, finitude—that is what it is all about. I can resign everything by my own strength and find peace and rest in the pain. . . . [but] [b]y my own strength I cannot get the least little thing that belongs to finitude. . . . By my own strength I cannot get her back again, for I use all my strength in resigning. On the other hand, by faith, says that marvelous knight, by faith you will get her by virtue of the absurd. (FT, pp. 49–50)

While resignation, emotionally speaking, is clearly a very difficult action to undertake, there is nothing intellectually incomprehensible involved in performing it. Namely, there is a *correspondence* between the act of the knight and his understanding of the reality of his life and his expectations regarding it. Returning to Abraham, had he been only a knight of resignation (rather than a knight of faith), there would have been a correspondence between his act of resignation—horribly exemplified in his hand drawing the knife—and his expectation that Isaac was about to die and cease being a part of his life "here in the world." However, Abraham's faith is expressed in his baffling expectation that Isaac, despite all evidence against it, will nevertheless live (see FT, p. 36). Abraham's faith is characterized as "paradoxical" precisely because it contains elements that do not fit well with each other.<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, Abraham is fully aware, in accordance with his human understanding and experience, that

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<sup>14</sup>See, for example FT, pp. 33, 52–53. On the challenge to understand how the two seemingly contradictory beliefs of Abraham's faith work together, see also John Lippitt, *Kierkegaard and Fear and Trembling* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 66–76.

he is about to kill Isaac; on the other hand he believes, in accordance with his faith, that Isaac will live. It is crucial to clarify here that the paradox of Abraham's faith *does not* amount to holding contradictory beliefs: Abraham's faith is *not* irrational, and the problem he faces is *not* a logical one. He does not believe in  $x$  and  $\text{not-}x$ : he does not believe that Isaac will be both dead and alive at the same time; he does not believe that God will and will not fulfil his promise to make him the father of a great nation through Isaac. Rather, Abraham believes that God will fulfil his promise, and he firmly holds this belief despite lacking the understanding regarding its realization. Moreover, he firmly holds this belief despite having all human reasons to abandon it or to doubt the possibility of its realization; that is, he holds this belief despite acting in a way that seems to work *against* the fulfilment of God's promise.<sup>15</sup> Abraham's faith, then, amounts to *trusting* that God's promise will be fulfilled, even when everything indicates otherwise.

Now, Abraham is the father of faith, the paradigm of a knight who succeeds in holding on to his trust in God even in the context of the most difficult situation imaginable.<sup>16</sup> But what about mundane people, those who are not given a specific promise and who are not requested to sacrifice their sons? Given that faith is a possibility open before every human being who passionately wills it, what does faith amount to when the believer is not an Abraham? Kierkegaard imagines the existence of such a mundane knight and depicts a detailed portrait of him, emphasizing his prosaic features and his overall 'earthly' demeanour (see FT, pp. 38–40). However, he concludes this description by stressing that this man has renounced (and is renouncing) "everything" (FT, p. 40): the mundane knight renounces all the finite goods that constitute the meaning of his life here in the world. His renunciation of "everything," I suggest, means that he accepts the loss inherent in the nature of our existence on earth. After all, time is passing by and fleeing, taking away everything within it, which is everything that we have. All things temporal are afflicted with loss, and the mundane knight, in his resignation, is reconciled with the essential impossibility of having a secure hold on anything whatsoever (his material and non-material possessions, his family, his loved ones, his friends, and even his own life).

In his resignation, then, the mundane knight willingly and wholeheartedly sees and accepts himself as denied of everything. He sees into the intrinsic ephemerality of everything that he cares about, of everything that he most desires. From the point of view of his resignation, even that which is present is seen as essentially absent. Accordingly, had the mundane

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<sup>15</sup>Hence he holds this belief "by virtue of the absurd": namely, not by virtue of his understanding, not by virtue of his experience, not by virtue of any "human calculation."

<sup>16</sup>It is therefore worth emphasizing that the test that Abraham withstands does not regard his willingness to sacrifice his son (Kierkegaard gives examples of "Abrahams" who are willing to sacrifice their sons but nevertheless fail the test; see FT, pp. 10–14), but rather his ability to trust God.

knight been a knight of resignation alone, he could have found no joy in the finite. In the same manner of the young man with regard to his princess, so does the mundane knight of resignation clearly understand how valuable the finite is for him, and how deep is his attachment to finitude—but he cannot joyfully get involved with it. Against the background of the stories of the young man and the mundane knight, we can therefore describe resignation as a position of *release*, which is indeed painful but also upbuilding. The knight accepts that, essentially, he cannot have a secure hold on anything valuable in his life, thus departing from the natural, immediate tie that one usually maintains with the finite goods bestowed on one. The latter is a self-assured position, which is oblivious to the essential insecurity of the finite goods in one's life. The movement of resignation, on the other hand, edifies the knight to humbly acknowledge the value of everything bestowed on him, and not to take anything for granted. Having resigned, he is in the position of Job who in the midst of his greatest pain first recognized that “the Lord gave.”<sup>17</sup>

Performing the movement of resignation, then, the mundane knight understands his connection to the finite in a new way, thus releasing his hold on everything (by considering everything as belonging to the realm of God's will rather than to that of his own will). However, he does not stop at resignation: after all, he is a knight of *faith*. And being a knight of faith means that *while renouncing everything*, the knight also *renews* his hold on the finite. Kierkegaard speaks of faith in terms of grasping the finite or regaining it: in an important sense the knight receives back the same thing he is renouncing, *without in any way cancelling his renunciation*. Whether the thing is actually lost (as in the story of the young man), or not (as in the story of the mundane knight), the knight of faith, in his resignation, considers the thing as *essentially* lost. However, having thus *released* his hold, the knight of faith *receives back* the released finite goods into his life. This means that despite accepting their essential (and radical) apartness from him in the context of resignation, in *faith* he can *tie himself to them in bonds of joy, hope and expectation*. While the knight of resignation is tied to the finite only in a bond of pain, the knight of faith—while continually undertaking the movement of resignation—is involved in the finite in a renewed, painful and yet *joyful*, way.

Faith, then, is a paradoxical affirmation of finitude because it enables the believer to maintain a renewed tie with the finite, which is characterized in a releasing-yet-holding kind of position with regard to everything in his life. The knight who in his resignation clearly sees into the essential impossibility of having a secure hold on anything finite, in his faith “has this security that makes him delight in it as if finitude were the surest thing of all” (FT, p. 40). His faith-full, paradoxical, affirmation of finitude can thus be understood in terms of *trust*. While the unavoidable evanes-

<sup>17</sup>See “The Lord Gave, and the Lord Took Away; Blessed Be the Name of the Lord,” in Søren Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

cence of everything we care about is an obstacle that essentially threatens the fulfilment of the good we aspire to achieve (such as happy and devoted attachments to family, beloved ones, and friends)—faith is the *trust* that this goodness will ultimately be fulfilled, even when the believer cannot understand how and in which form this could be realized.<sup>18</sup> Just as Abraham had trust that God would fulfil his promise despite the clearest indication against this fulfilment (namely, Abraham's hand drawing the knife), the mundane knight of faith has trust in the fulfilment of goodness in this world, despite the clear evidence against it (namely, the finite nature of everything, which prevents a secure hold on it).

I therefore suggest that we understand the Kierkegaardian faith as an existential position of trust, that allows a unique affirmation of finitude: the believer sustains a new kind of relationship with the finite goods given to him. Namely, while *painfully releasing his hold* on everything—denying himself of everything he desires in his resignation and 'dying to the world'—the knight of faith paradoxically *affirms his joyful hold* of everything. He renews his involvement with everything he desires and, paradoxically, is reborn to the world. The knight of faith is therefore immersed in finitude—but in a renewed, purified, paradoxical way. His love for the world is gained and maintained in pain, but it is the greatest and most joyful love possible.<sup>19</sup>

The greater extent of the knight of faith's love (in comparison with the knight of resignation's love; see FT, p. 35) is therefore a consequence of his deeper involvement with the finite. It is connected to his ability to be attached to the finite not only in ties of reconciled pain but also in bonds of hopeful joy. Now, to be thus attached means that the knight is exposed to the emotional and cognitive trembling involved in the strenuous effort "to find joy by virtue of the absurd" despite continuously seeing "the sword hanging over the beloved's head" (FT, p. 50). In other words, to be thus attached amounts to the demanding spiritual striving that harmonizes submitting oneself uncompromisingly to God's will with strongly affirming one's involvement with the finite.

In his essay "The Knight of Faith," Robert M. Adams suggests that "[t]he portrait of the knight of faith . . . can be seen as one of a number of attempts Kierkegaard made to understad, or imagine, how devotion to God

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<sup>18</sup>The idea of faith as an ultimate trust in the fulfilment of ethical ideals (that is, ideals concerning the achievement of the good), despite evident obstacles on the way of the believer who wishes to fulfil them, is powerfully developed in John J. Davenport's essay "Faith as Eschatological Trust in *Fear and Trembling*," in *Ethics, Love, and Faith in Kierkegaard: Philosophical Engagements*, ed. E. F. Mooney (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 196–233.

<sup>19</sup>It should be emphasized that the claim regarding the simultaneity of resignation and faith does not mean that the same person can be both a knight of resignation and a knight of faith at the same time. Resignation is included in faith, and therefore the knight of faith also, necessarily, performs the movement of resignation. But this does not make him a *knight of resignation*. The knight of resignation lacks an essential feature characteristic *only to the knight of faith*: namely, the ability to trust (which takes him beyond mere resignation). Therefore, the knight of faith who trusts (in addition to renouncing), and the knight of resignation who does not and cannot trust (but only renounces) are necessarily two different persons.

could coexist with pursuit and enjoyment of finite goods.”<sup>20</sup> I agree with Adams and my claim is that this is a key point that takes us straight back to *Works of Love*. While in *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard, by virtue of his understanding of faith as a double movement, succeeds in seeing the possibility of the coexistence of a devotion to God and an unreserved attachment to finite goods, in *Works of Love* he seems to fail to find the balance between these two fundamental needs. This failure is most sharply expressed in his ambivalence with regard to *preferential love*: the kind of love that undoubtedly represents one of the greatest finite goods that constitute our existence.

### 3. The Enactment of Love by Faith

In the first section of this paper I claimed that the distinction between “love” and its “works” is important for addressing adequately the problem of preferential love in *Works of Love*. It is now time to return to this claim, but first let us recall the meaning of this distinction. I suggested that we understand it as implying that there is a primordial power within us—the fundamental “love itself” (implanted in us by the ultimate origin of love, God)—that manifests itself and receives its distinctive forms by the *works* of love. Now, thinking of such a picture of love, we may say that although our humanness (namely, our being God’s creatures) endows us all with the *potential* to love, this is not enough. There is a gap between the potential (or power) of loving given to one, and the unsatisfactory ways in which one often loves. Indeed, there are countless ways to frustrate relationships of love, there are many who feel that they experience love in an unhappy or unfulfilling way, and there are some who feel that they do not experience love at all. Therefore, from Kierkegaard’s point of view, the challenging question regarding love concerns the *realization* of the potential of loving given to us. In other words, he is interested in the way love is *enacted* by its works.

It is not surprising, then, that *Works of Love* is specifically devoted to enquiring into the genuine way of loving. Kierkegaard believes that the common understanding of what it means to love is deeply confused. What is usually understood as loving—the passionate preferential feelings for particular persons in one’s life—is *not* a genuine love for another person but rather another form of *self-love*, focused on satisfying one’s selfish needs and desires (WL, p. 53). Genuine love is the kind of love referred to in the *love commandment*: the love for one’s neighbour, directed *equally* at everybody, and based on *self-denial* (WL, pp. 49, 52). This is the kind of love that is genuinely concerned with the good of the other because, according to Kierkegaard, by “rooting out” one’s preferences it secures the love from being a means to satisfy one’s selfishness (WL, pp. 44, 55). Therefore, he claims, to love genuinely is to love in a neighbourly way and moreover, this is the *only* way to love genuinely: there is only one kind of true love, the neighbourly kind (WL, pp. 143, 146).

<sup>20</sup>Robert M. Adams, “The Knight of Faith,” *Faith and Philosophy* 7.4 (1990), p. 390.

At the same time, Kierkegaard does not wish to deny the importance, and the (moral and religious) legitimacy of those loves known as “preferential.” He commends the more intimate<sup>21</sup> kind of love for a romantic beloved, family members, and friends, and in the fourth deliberation of *Works of Love*, where he elaborates on “our *duty* to love the people we see” (WL, p. 154, my emphasis), he discusses intimate loves as being a *necessary implication* of the love commandment. What is the status of preferentiality, then? If the only kind of genuine love is neighbourly love, and this essentially demands that all people be treated *equally*, how can the *essentially preferential*<sup>22</sup> attitude in the context of intimate loves be affirmed?

Several interpretative attempts have been made recently to reconcile Kierkegaard’s uncompromising demand for equality in love together with his insistence on the legitimacy of intimate loves (which necessarily include preference).<sup>23</sup> Of these, the most influential is that of M. Jamie Ferreira in her commentary on *Works of Love*. Ferreira endorses Kierkegaard’s understanding of love according to which neighbourly love is the only valid and genuine kind of love:

One is tempted to say that Kierkegaard wants to ensure that friendship and erotic love are both supplemented by nonpreferential love, but he rejects the language of supplement or addition. He makes this clearer later on when he insists that “there is only one kind of love, the spirit’s love.” [p. 143] . . . [I]t can and should “lie at the base of and be present in every other expression of love”; “it is in all of them, that is, it can be, but Christian love itself you cannot point to.” (p. 146)<sup>24</sup>

How does Ferreira explain the nature of intimate, preferential loves, then? According to her understanding, neighbourly love is indeed the fundamental love to be found in every genuine expression of love, but this fundamental “basis” is formed and expressed differently in accordance with the needs of the neighbour who is loved. Thus, the love for one’s spouse, for example, is different from that for the homeless in the street because,

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<sup>21</sup>I use ‘intimate love’ as a more neutral term (in contrast with the less neutral ‘preferential love’) to describe a love which is directed at those people in our life with whom we are connected in closer relationships: family, friends, romantic partners.

<sup>22</sup>What does making preferences mean? To prefer person *x* over another person *y* has at least three meanings: 1. To consider *x* as better and more valuable than *y*; 2. To choose *x* over *y* in contexts where choosing is a natural part of our life (I choose one person to become my close friend and not the other; I commit myself to only one man whom I choose as my romantic beloved and not to that man or to the other); 3. To choose *x* over *y* in situations where the need to make a hierarchy is forced upon us. Namely, since we are limited in time, money, and other material and spiritual assets, we cannot provide everything to everybody and we need to choose whom we prefer to help (or even simply be with) at every given moment of our life. Now, of these three meanings of preference only the first one is negative and needs to be unequivocally rooted out from any expression of love. However, Kierkegaard does not seem to distinguish between a ‘bad’ preference and a ‘good’ (or morally neutral) one, and he denounces preferentiality altogether.

<sup>23</sup>See again note 4 above.

<sup>24</sup>Ferreira, *Love’s Grateful Striving*, p. 45. Kierkegaard often uses the terms “the spirit’s love” and “Christian love” to indicate neighbourly love; from his point of view all these terms are synonymous.



in each case, the lover is sensitive to the differences in needs. Ferreira's solution, then, keeps preferentiality away from the picture of love and explains the evident difference between various attitudes of love in terms of responding to different needs. In other words, love is always *the same* in the important, neighbourly sense of acknowledging that every human being is entitled to being equally regarded, and thus of treating everybody by way of self-denial. However, this fundamental love is sensitive to the differences between its objects, and is therefore expressed *differently* in different contexts by *responding differently* to the relevant needs of the loved person.

This solution indeed manages elegantly and convincingly to reconcile Kierkegaard's philosophical-religious understanding of neighbourly love as being the *one* and *only* kind of genuine love, and the evident—and invaluable—existence of *various* intimate attitudes of love in one's life (such as love for a romantic beloved, love for a friend, love for a mother, a father, or one's child). However, it seems that the 'price' that we need to pay for this account is consent to a rather weak and disappointing version of intimate loves. After all, can the uniqueness of the love we feel towards our romantic beloved, for example, be understood only in terms of responding to his or her different needs? Do the intensity and passion of such a love, as well as its distinctive character (differentiating it from the love for the homeless in the street) amount only to discerning the beloved's different needs and acting (and feeling) in accordance with them?

It seems that in order to address the particular character of intimate loves, we need to account not only for the needs of the *beloved*, but also for the needs of the *one who loves*: for one's desires, inclinations, and preferences. It is not possible for every neighbour to become a close friend of mine, let alone a romantic beloved of mine; what determines that *this* specific neighbour (and not another) will become my friend, or my romantic beloved, is sensitivity to *my* needs, to *my* aspirations, to *my* desires. In other words, it requires sensitivity to *my preferences*. But Kierkegaard is strongly reluctant to allow any form of preferentiality to play a part in his account of the nature of genuine love, and it is easy enough to understand why. There are two reasons for his denunciation of preferentiality: first, because it obviously opposes equality, and second, because it seems to oppose (at least on the face of it) self-denial.

And now we can more easily understand the roots of Kierkegaard's ambivalent position: on the one hand he wishes to affirm the legitimacy of intimate loves such as romantic love and friendship while, on the other, his understanding of love as being necessarily neighbourly and based on self-denial does not leave real room for such loves. Ferreira's attempt to make such room for these loves by explaining their distinctiveness in terms of responding to needs (rather than to preferences) fails to capture the essence of intimate loves and therefore does not, ultimately, address adequately the problem of preferential love. This problem is particularly complex because it presents different intuitions regarding love that seem



to be in tension with one another. Indeed, we wish to accept Kierkegaard's demand for self-denial (because it secures love from falling into selfishness), and we agree with his insistence on the importance of equality (because we do not wish to love in a way that threatens our moral obligation towards the neighbour). However, these demands seem to prevent the legitimacy of intimate love's essential features: attentiveness to the self who loves and preferentiality. Is there a way, then, to reconcile the demands of neighbourly love for self-denial and equality with the demands of intimate love for self-attentiveness and preferentiality, without compromising either of these demands? My claim is that there is.

Before we can properly understand this way, however, we need to acknowledge that there is something confused in the picture of love that Kierkegaard presents in *Works of Love*. This confusion, I suggest, is three-fold:

1. While Kierkegaard is correct in insisting on the importance of neighbourly love, he is wrong in defining it as the only kind of genuine love: that is, he is wrong in equating it with '*love itself*.'
2. While Kierkegaard is correct in insisting on the indispensability of self-denial, he is wrong in understanding love in terms of self-denial *alone*.
3. While Kierkegaard is correct in insisting that neighbourly love should exclude preference, he is wrong in denouncing preferentiality *altogether*.

Let us begin with the third point. Kierkegaard's strong reluctance regarding preferentiality is derived from his understandable objection to any form of selfishness in love. And despite the important distinction he draws between 'bad' selfishness and 'correct' self-love (the love for self referred to in the commandment), Kierkegaard seems to conflate preferentiality with selfishness even though they are not necessarily tied to one another. Indeed, preference implies addressing one's own needs, desires, and inclinations—but such responsiveness and sensitivity to oneself can be sustained within the context of a correct self-love that comes not at the expense of the well-being or the needs of the other. However, such 'self-responsiveness' (in the context of preferentiality) does seem, at least on the face of it, to oppose 'self-denial': while the latter is concerned with denying the self's worldly affairs and desires, the former is concerned with *affirming* them.

But does an affirmation of the self necessarily contradict a denial of the self? Maybe it is possible to perform these two movements—of denial and affirmation—together? Indeed, such a possibility was carefully demonstrated by Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*. The paradoxical affirmation of finite goods (including the embodied self along with his desires, passions and concerns) while at the same time infinitely renouncing them is, after all, the theme of *Fear and Trembling* (see again section 2 above).

And this brings us to the second confusion of Kierkegaard in *Works of Love*. While it would be inaccurate to claim that the position he presents there is identical to that of the knight of resignation in *Fear and Trembling*, it is nevertheless reasonable to suggest that self-denial is categorically akin to resignation (that is, conceptually speaking it is closer to the movement of resignation than to that of world-affirmation).<sup>25</sup> The affirmation of finitude in *Works of Love* is therefore only partial: although the believer is involved with the finite (he loves his finite neighbours and is concerned about their finite needs and well-being), he lacks the joy that only the second movement of faith allows. He lacks the ability to take pleasure, unreservedly, in worldly affairs and to enjoy, unqualifiedly, the finite goods bestowed on him. Kierkegaard's ambivalent treatment of preferential love—the kind of love associated with worldly joys and earthly pleasures—demonstrates the consequences of abandoning the double movement of faith and replacing it with the single movement of self-denial. Thus, if we return to Kierkegaard's earlier account of the correct mode of existence—namely, the life of faith as he presents it in *Fear and Trembling*—the vision of loving preferentially, *while at the same time renouncing, or denying, oneself*, becomes a valid possibility. In the framework of the double movement of resignation-and-affirmation, preferentiality *can coexist* with self-denial. One renounces oneself (one's will, one's desires, one's worldly attachments and preferences) and at the same time affirms oneself: namely, gains a new—humble and trusting—hold on oneself.

However, we are still left with the problem that under no framework can preferentiality and *equality* coexist (as attributes of the *same* attitude of love). And here the first confusion of Kierkegaard in *Works of Love* becomes relevant. The demand for equality (an essential feature of neighbourly love) and the demand for preferentiality (an essential feature of intimate love) are two contradictory demands. Therefore, if Kierkegaard claims that there is only one kind of genuine love, and he insists that this is the *neighbourly* kind of love, it is not clear how this love can allow for intimate, *preferential*, expressions of love (when it is directed at the closer neighbours in our life such as the beloved or the friend). Now, the picture of love that Kierkegaard presents, according to which there is only one fundamental love that receives its different forms in accordance with the neighbours at which it is directed, is an attractive picture. If we wish to allow the coexistence of different expressions of love, and yet include all the multiple expressions under one category (that of *love*), it is reasonable to assume a common ground that all the different expressions of love share. However, as against Kierkegaard (and Ferreira) my claim is that this common ground *cannot* be neighbourly love. What, then, is the alternative picture?

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<sup>25</sup>For a detailed discussion regarding the differences between *Fear and Trembling's* resignation, *Works of Love's* self-denial and *Fear and Trembling's* faith, see Krishek, *Kierkegaard on Faith and Love*.

Returning to the distinction between *love* and *works* of love—between the primordial power and its manifested forms—I suggest that we understand the one genuine love in terms of what I called *love itself*. This fundamental love is the divine “element” which is “implanted” in us, the driving power that “you cannot point to” even though it “can lie at the base of . . . every other expression of love” (WL, p. 146). Love itself is the unfathomable power that endows us with the ability to love, but for this potentiality to become a realization we need to enact it through the *works of love*. How do these works look like, then? What kind of shape do they take while manifesting love in the world? Having enquired into *Fear and Trembling*, I wish to suggest that the form—the work—through which love is enacted, has the *double structure of faith*. The genuine lover who enacts the power of love within him (or her) does so by performing the double movement of resignation (namely, self-denial) and affirmation. To understand what this means, and how it manages to reconcile between neighbourly love and preferential love, let us look closely at the *amended* Kierkegaardian picture of love that I suggest here, while comparing it with the understanding Kierkegaard originally presents.

We said that Kierkegaard thinks of “love itself” in terms of “caring” (*Kjerlighed*).<sup>26</sup> Caring can indeed be understood as a basic power that drives us to transcend ourselves; it is an emotional bridge, as it were, linking us and that which we recognize as different from ourselves. To think of “love itself” in terms of caring also agrees with Kierkegaard’s characterization of it as a need for companionship which is deeply rooted within us (see WL, p. 154). We are not sufficient to ourselves; we need to transcend ourselves and reach out to something beyond us. This need drives us to connect ourselves to that which is separate and different from ourselves; it constitutes our basic attitude of caring.

The first step, then, is to understand love in its primordially as “caring”: a fundamental power, implanted in us by God, which “pulls” us beyond ourselves, driving us to turn towards something different from us. I accept this Kierkegaardian point of departure and, like him, I suggest that this “caring” is the basis for every expression—every *work*—of love. However, while Kierkegaard equates between “caring” (“love itself”) and “neighbourly love,” my claim is that neighbourly love is one possible expression (among many possible others) of caring. Neighbourly love is *not* identical with “love itself”—rather, it is a *work* of love.

Now, understanding this work, this action, as structured by the double movement of faith, means that neighbourly love is based not only on self-denial (as Kierkegaard characterizes it) but also on self-affirmation. This means that while genuinely denying himself, the lover also simultaneously “returns” to himself in self-affirmation. It is important to remember that even in the context of neighbourly love, which usually expresses itself by attending specifically to the neighbour’s needs (so that the focus is on

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<sup>26</sup>See note 7 above.

the *neighbour*), the self who loves is also involved (so that there is a return to the *self*). This involvement is expressed in the feelings of tenderness and warmth that accompany love for the neighbour, for example, or in the expectation of mutuality (namely, the expectation to be acknowledged by the neighbour, to be loved by him in return).<sup>27</sup>

The involvement of the self is of course more prominent when it comes to a different work of love: that is, the work that gives love an intimate, or preferential form. Intimate love is a work of love no less than neighbourly love is and, like neighbourly love, it is constituted by the double movement of faith. Accordingly, self-denial is an essential component of intimate love and the role it plays in the context of such love is by no means smaller than the role it plays in the context of neighbourly love. This means that while working the work of intimate love (and loving, say, one's romantic beloved), the lover—while *affirming* himself (his needs, inclinations, and desires)—keeps *denying* himself (both before the neighbour who seeks his neighbourly love, and before his beloved who seeks his romantic love).

Thus, both neighbourly love and intimate (preferential) love are works of love: they both enact the primordial “caring” into concrete manifestations of love. As such, both neighbourly love and preferential love demand from the lover that he perform the double movement of faith: if he loves *x* in a neighbourly way or if he loves *x* in a preferential way, the lover is demanded to deny himself and to affirm himself at one and the same time. The difference between these two works of love is that while the work of neighbourly love demands *equality*, the work of intimate love demands *preferentiality*.

Now, in the picture of love that Kierkegaard presents it is not clear how the same love can be both equal (when it is directed at every neighbour) and preferential (when it is directed at an intimate, closer neighbour). In the alternative picture of love presented here, on the other hand, we do not have to face such a problem: after all, we are not talking about *the same love* but rather on two *different* expressions of (the primordial power of) love; two *works* of love. When love (as a primordial power, i.e. “caring”) is enacted by faith into the form of neighbourly love, it becomes a feeling which can be (and should be) directed equally at everybody: a feeling that amounts to respect and compassion and to wishing the well-being of the other; a feeling that drives us to help the neighbour in his or her need. But when love (“caring”) is enacted by faith into the form of intimate love, a new range of feelings, which can and should be directed only at a few neighbours in our life, is opened before us. It is important to emphasize, though, that these intimate, preferential feelings—such as physical and spiritual attraction, special responsibility and devotedness, a desire to

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<sup>27</sup>Note that this expectation should not be regarded as a condition for our love for the neighbour. We are obliged to love the neighbour without demanding anything in return, and without placing any conditions on our love. However, loving the neighbour by means of (the double movement of) faith makes a real room for the expectation—and more than this, for the *trust*—that eventually we will be loved in return.

spend the rest of one's life in the company of one's beloved, and so on—*do not contradict* the feeling of neighbourly love. We continue to feel the latter both with regard to every possible neighbour and with regard to our intimate beloveds (who are, after all, also neighbours in addition to their being our intimate beloveds).

Separating neighbourly love and intimate love into two different works of love, then, does not mean that these two loves cannot be felt and worked together (more than that: in the case of intimate loves they *must* be worked and felt together, because, again, every intimate beloved is also a neighbour). This separation, rather, allows us to secure the uniqueness and distinctiveness of preferential loves, while demonstrating the way they comply with neighbourly love and conform to Kierkegaard's demand for self-denial.

To conclude, the amended picture of love presented here addresses two major concerns of Kierkegaard. First, understanding the work of love in terms of the double movement of faith (rather than in terms of self-denial alone) addresses Kierkegaard's concern with regard to selfishness: it demonstrates how it is possible to love preferentially without in any way failing to meet the demand for self-denial. Second, insisting on the distinction between love and works of love allows one to apply the important demand of equality only to the neighbourly work of love (rather than to every possible work of love), because it demonstrates that equality is an essential feature of a specific enactment (work) of love, and not of love itself (the primordial power that constitutes the common ground for every manifestation of love). This addresses Kierkegaard's concern with regard to the harmony between different expressions of love: it allows for one work, one *enactment*, of love (namely, neighbourly love) to be directed equally at every possible neighbour, while another work, another *enactment*, of love (namely, preferential love) is directed exclusively at only intimate, closer neighbours.

Thus, the distinction between love and works of love, coupled with the understanding of the work of love as structured in the double movement of faith, presents a picture of love that keeps in focus what is justly important for Kierkegaard in *Works of Love* (common ground for all the possible manifestations of love, the indispensability of equality for neighbourly love, the essentiality of self-denial to every manifestation of love, the possible harmony between different expressions of love), without compromising on the legitimacy, centrality, and uniqueness of preferential love. Despite having criticised Kierkegaard's confused understanding of love in *Works of Love*, then, we can see how a different use of the tools that he himself supplies in two of his major works (namely, *Fear and Trembling* and *Works of Love*) can offer a rich and productive understanding of love.