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The Conflict of Faith and Love:
A Comparative Study of Feuerbach and Kierkegaard

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A Senior Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Divinity

Harvard Divinity School
Cambridge, Massachusetts

May 2025

Abstract

This thesis examines the apparent contradiction between faith and love in Christian theology by placing Ludwig Feuerbach and Søren Kierkegaard into direct conversation. It begins with Feuerbach's critique in *The Essence of Christianity*, especially focusing on the chapter on the contradiction between faith and love, which argues that Christian faith constructs an exclusive framework that distorts love into a tool for conditionality. Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* introduces how he understands faith under the term "teleological suspension of the ethical." In this framework, faith transcends human moral norms that impose the sacrifice of the ethical for the sake of the ultimate duty to God, grounded in faith. On the other hand, Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* describes how he comprehends faith. He reframes love as an unconditional ethical obligation grounded in divine command that surpasses exclusive love and partiality, which contradicts Feuerbach and Kierkegaard's own authorship.

Through close textual analysis, this study investigates how Kierkegaard's understanding of faith and love engages Feuerbach's concerns, especially the tension between religious exclusivity and ethical universality. The thesis argues that although Kierkegaard shares Feuerbach's critique of the precedence of faith over ethical love, he ultimately reconfigures ethics through faith, not by suspending or neglecting ethics, but by grounding it theologically.

Nevertheless, this solution is not without complications. While Kierkegaard offers a profound theological reconfiguration of ethical love, his account remains bound within a Christian framework. As such, it may not fully resolve Feuerbach's charge that faith distorts love through exclusion. This thesis thus concludes not with a resolution, but with a recognition: that Kierkegaard's response, though compelling, may still contain the very seeds of the exclusivist

love Feuerbach critiques: a tension that underscores the ongoing challenge of reconciling faith with universal ethics.

Keywords: Faith, Love, Ethics, Feuerbach, Kierkegaard, Theological Anthropology

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I. Introduction

The double commandment of love—to love God and to love one's neighbor—stands at the heart of Christian ethics, yet it also reveals a profound tension between faith in God and interpersonal love. At first glance, these two loves may appear harmonious, with the love of God serving as the foundation for the love of neighbor. Most people accept the double commandment of love without question, taking pride in the fact that it is the greatest commandment in Christianity.

However, in many conservative denominations of Christianity, regardless of ethnic, social, and cultural backgrounds, particularly within Evangelical communities, love for others is often complicated by rigid theological frameworks. One troubling example is the widespread attitude toward adherents of other religions. The advocates of other religions are not only viewed as misguided or in error but are often framed within the rhetoric of damnation. The notion of hell becomes less a theological category than a social tool—used to mark, exclude, and ultimately disqualify the religious other from the sphere of neighborly concern. In such discourses, love becomes conditional, and faith becomes a boundary rather than a bridge.

It was this contradiction, the claim to love in the name of a faith that justifies exclusion, that led me to ask these questions: Can faith and love coexist without contradiction? Does faith necessitate the abandonment of human ethical love, or can it transform it? These questions, which lie at the heart of Feuerbach's critique of Christianity and Kierkegaard's paradoxical affirmation of faith, form the central concern of this thesis.[1]

[1] This religious and ethical dilemma is not novel to Christian moral inquiries. Philip Quinn has argued that there is a potential dilemma at the very root of Christian ethics. See Philip Quinn, "Tragic Dilemmas, Suffering Love, and Christian Life," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 17, no. 1 (1989): 151–183.

Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) critiques this exact point in *The Essence of Christianity* by exposing an inherent contradiction.[2] This book is divided into two parts. The first part explains the thesis that humanity's perception of God is ultimately a projection of its own self-concept, asserting that theology is essentially anthropology. In contrast, the second part examines the contradictory doctrines of Christianity one by one.[3] Among these, the chapter on the contradiction between faith and love thoroughly explores the tension between faith in God and love for one's neighbor.

According to Feuerbach, Christian faith constructs a dualistic framework in which belief in God equates to moral goodness, while unbelief signifies evil. In this system, love becomes exclusionary, directed primarily toward those who share the faith, thereby undermining its universality and ethical sincerity. Faith distorts love into a tool for proselytizing, reducing it to an instrumental act aimed at converting the unbeliever. This critique raises a crucial question: Can the love of God and the love of neighbor truly coexist, or does faith inherently limit love's universality?

To explore this issue, I will turn to Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), whose works address the paradoxes of faith and ethics. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard introduces the concept of the "teleological suspension of the ethical,"[4] illustrating how faith in God may require one to transcend universal moral obligations.[5] This tension between faith and ethics

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[2] Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 2d ed, ed. George Eliot (London: Trübner, 1881).
[3] John H. Smith, *Dialogues between Faith and Reason: The Death and Return of God in Modern German Thought*, 1st ed (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 148.
[4] Kierkegaard published this work under the pseudonym *Johannes de Silentio*. It is well-known that Kierkegaard published many of his works under various pseudonyms, and interpreting these works in light of their pseudonyms often enriches their meaning. While analyzing the significance of the pseudonym *Johannes de Silentio* and its connection to Kierkegaard's other writings would add depth to this paper, it will not be addressed here due to space constraints. Therefore, for convenience, this paper will refer to the author of *Fear and Trembling* simply as Kierkegaard.
[5] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, eds. C. Stephen Evans and Sylvia Walsh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

could seem to affirm Feuerbach's critique. However, Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* offers a counterpoint by presenting Christian love as rooted in God's infinite love,[6] which manifests in unconditional love for one's neighbor.[7] Kierkegaard thus suggests that faith does not diminish love but deepens it, enabling a more profound and universal practice of neighborly love.

This paper examines whether Kierkegaard's understanding of faith and love addresses Feuerbach's critique of Christianity. By analyzing Feuerbach's argument and Kierkegaard's response, I will explore how the double commandment of love resolves the tension between faith and ethics. Considering Kierkegaard's two works, I aim to show how his theology both acknowledges elements of Feuerbach's critique and offers a resolution, ultimately reconciling the love of God with the love of neighbor and presenting faith as a source of ethical love.

This paper uses a textual analysis methodology, focusing on the close reading of Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* and Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and *Works of Love*. The study critically examines key ideas such as the double commandment of love and the tension between faith and ethics, engaging both thinkers' arguments to explore points of convergence and divergence. This approach allows for a nuanced examination of how Kierkegaard's insights can address Feuerbach's critique while offering a constructive theological response.

Despite being near contemporaries, there has been little in-depth scholarly engagement with the relationship between Feuerbach and Kierkegaard. However, journal entries from the mid-1840s indicate that Kierkegaard was reading *The Essence of Christianity*, and it is well known that the two thinkers shared a critique of the Hegelian system, placing them both within

[6] Interestingly, it is one of the works that he published under his own name, as opposed to his more famous pseudonymous works.
[7] Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses,* eds. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (New York: Harper, 1962).

the so-called Left-Hegelian category. Notably, recent research by Malesic (2007) emphasizes that Kierkegaard's most active engagement with Feuerbach occurred during the composition of *Philosophical Fragments*, a work concerned with the immanent and transcendent dimensions of religious truth.[8] According to Malesic, *Philosophical Fragments* can be read as a clever and indirect response to Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*, suggesting that Feuerbach significantly influenced Kierkegaard's development of the concept of religious faith.

Nevertheless, studies exploring the relationship between Feuerbach and Kierkegaard specifically from the perspective of love remain scarce. Although Michael Glass's 2023 doctoral dissertation, "Kierkegaard and Feuerbach on the Nature of Christianity," makes a valuable contribution,[9] its exclusive focus on *Works of Love* while discoursing the concept of love leaves out Kierkegaard's broader existential framework of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious spheres. Furthermore, few studies examine the relationship between the two key works addressed in this paper—*Fear and Trembling* and *Works of Love*. Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms has often discouraged scholars from connecting the thematic content of different works. One notable exception is Krishek's 2008 article, "Two Forms of Love," which attempts to resolve Kierkegaard's seemingly self-contradictory attitude toward preferential love relationships in *Works of Love* by applying the concept of the paradox of faith developed in *Fear and Trembling*.[10]

The next section analyzes Feuerbach's critique, in the order of his concept of faith and love, focusing on his claim that faith contradicts morality with its malignant principles, thereby

[8] Jonathan Malesic, "Illusion and Offense in 'Philosophical Fragments': Kierkegaard's Inversion of Feuerbach's Critique of Christianity," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 62, no. 1 (2007): 43–55.
[9] Michael Edwin Seehorn Glass, "Kierkegaard and Feuerbach on the Nature of Christianity," PhD dissertation, (Temple University, 2023).
[10] Sharon Krishek, "Two Forms of Love: The Problem of Preferential Love in Kierkegaard's Works of Love," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 36, no. 4 (2008): 595–617.

limiting love's universality. Then, the following section turns to Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* to understand his understanding of faith, examining the concept of the teleological suspension of the ethical and its implications for the conflict between faith and ethical love. In the third section, the paper focuses on Kierkegaard's understanding of love in *Works of Love,* which reinterprets the double commandment, showing how faith deepens rather than restricts neighborly love. The fourth section puts Feuerbach and Kierkegaard in conversation, exploring how Kierkegaard affirms parts of Feuerbach's critique while offering a resolution that expands love's ethical reach.

II. Feuerbach's Critique: The Contradiction Between Faith and Love

Feuerbach's central thesis is that "the essence of religion is the identity of the divine being with the human; but the form of religion, or its apparent, conscious nature, is the distinction between them."[11] He views love as revealing the identity of the divine and human essence, while faith corresponds to the form of religion, which separates the two. Thus, his work aims to demonstrate how Christian love and faith fundamentally oppose one another, advocating for the proper establishment of love as the true expression of the identity between the divine and human essence. This section will first examine Feuerbach's concept of faith and then address how, in Christianity, love has been distorted by faith, thereby highlighting the need to restore true love.

A) Faith as a Malignant Principle with Contradiction to Morality

[11] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 313.

Let us begin by examining Feuerbach's concept of faith. For Feuerbach, faith fundamentally distinguishes between truth and falsehood, making it inherently exclusive. In his understanding, faith asserts that "one thing alone is truth, one alone is God, one alone has the monopoly of being the Son of God."[12] Thus, by its very nature, faith inevitably divides believers and unbelievers.

Faith that divides believers and unbelievers creates a sense of superiority in the believer, as it grants them an exclusive privilege, distinguishing them from others. This faith ultimately projects the believer's *own* essence onto *another* being (God), thereby subtly concealing their sense of superiority and pride.[13] In this way, whereas Christians perceive themselves as *being exalted* through God's grace, non-Christians (pagans) are *exalting themselves,* which appears arrogant. Yet, Feuerbach critiques this so-called Christian humility, arguing that it is merely inverted arrogance.[14]

Of course, Feuerbach's analysis is only possible when supported by his central thesis that the essence of God is a projection of the essence of humanity. If God were not a projection of humanity, "one has the sense of one's own dignity in this divine personality"[15] would not be possible.

Since, in faith, the honor of God and the fame of Christ (both of which are essentially one's own honor and fame) are of utmost importance, freedom is permitted in matters unrelated to faith, such as eating.[16] However, when it comes to the object of faith, such freedom is inconceivable. Therefore, anyone who is not on the side of Christ is seen as an adversary, as faith

[12] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 314.
[13] Feuerbach explains this phenomenon by comparing it to the feeling that a servant's accomplishments and honor can seem greater than one's own. He illustrates this with the example of a Russian general who admitted that he felt more elevated when he served as an adjutant under his commander than he does now as a commander himself. See Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 317.
[14] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 316-317.
[15] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 316.
[16] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 318.

always operates on the principle of either/or. This conception of faith, for Feuerbach, is not a matter of existential trust or subjective confidence, but rather a dogmatic and objective claim to exclusive truth. It functions as a dividing line between the saved and the damned and thus stands in stark contradiction to any ethic grounded in universal love.

In other words, faith is essentially determinate and specific. Faith, being imperative, is fixed as dogma. When these imperative aspects of faith begin to be felt as limitations, faith itself has already ceased to exist.[17] That is, faith does not perceive or experience its imperatives as limitations; rather, the very sense of obligation inherent in faith becomes a source of power, functioning as a form of motivation. Thus, the determinacy and obligation of faith operate as fundamental principles, and the content of these principles serves to distinguish people based on the presence or absence of faith. For those who do not believe, unless they are presumed to hold the potential to become believers, they are regarded as holding an opposing god. Anything opposed to God is, by definition, hostile to God.[18]

> To believe, is synonymous with goodness; not to believe, with wickedness. (…) In its view, the unbeliever is an enemy to Christ out of obduracy, out of wickedness. Hence, faith has fellowship with believers only; unbelievers it rejects. It is well-disposed towards believers but ill-disposed towards unbelievers. *In faith, there lies a malignant principle*.[19]

Feuerbach argues that not only the Christian faith, but all faiths are fundamentally judgmental and condemning. This is because unbelievers are cursed and forsaken by God. For humans to accept or forgive what God has rejected would be to challenge and oppose God's judgment, which is tantamount to abandoning faith. For instance, Muslims annihilate unbelievers

[17] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 317-318.
[18] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 319.
[19] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 319-320.

with fire and the sword, while Christians condemn unbelievers to hellfire. This inherent condemnation within faith inevitably generates hostile dispositions, which naturally lead to the persecution of heretics.[20]

The tolerance of Christian or monotheistic faith is ultimately equivalent to intolerance toward any defiance of the absolute and exclusive authority of God; thus, faith inherently knows no tolerance. Feuerbach argues that all the cruelty present in the history of Christianity and its religion stems inevitably from faith or Christianity itself. Furthermore, even the denial of such cruelty by Christians is, according to him, an inevitable consequence of faith's tendency to claim all good for itself while attributing all evil to unbelief, improper faith, or humanity at large. In this denial lies the clear evidence that faith is the origin of such evils—its limitations, partisanship, and intolerance.[21]

This understanding of faith, according to Feuerbach, leads to outcomes that conflict with human morality, which is a natural moral sentiment in all humans, such as sympathy and moral obligation to others. This characteristic of faith inevitably prioritizes obligations to God far above obligations to humanity, and the love of God necessarily exalts itself above the laws of natural morality.[22] The reason morality is subordinated to faith and can, or even must, be sacrificed for it is that, according to faith, eternal happiness depends not on the fulfillment of ordinary human duties but on faith itself. Consequently, in certain actions, faith appears to be distinct from or even in opposition to morality. Since faith alone is regarded as the ultimate goal, anything that promotes faith is granted a privileged status. Thus, there is neither a natural nor an intrinsic connection between faith and moral disposition.[23]

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[20] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 321.
[21] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 326.
[22] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 328.
[23] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 329.

Because faith inherently conflicts with morality, according to Feuerbach, it stands in opposition to humanity's essential sense of morality and justice. As a result, faith becomes constrained by the need to produce good deeds and justify itself through love. In other words, while faith contradicts morality, it is simultaneously subject to its limitations.[24] This, Feuerbach argues, underscores how faith is fundamentally at odds with human nature. To overcome this unnaturalness, faith must demonstrate its validity through positive actions and prove itself through love since while love is not synonymous with morality, it is one of the most essential expressions of it.

In this sense, love functions less as a genuine expression of faith and more as a moral concession to the ethical demands of human nature. Christian love, shaped by the demands and necessities of faith, takes on a peculiar form and character combined with faith. Feuerbach argues that Christian love has been distorted by faith. Let us examine how Christian love is altered by faith and explore the specific forms and characteristics it assumes as a result.

B) Love as Distorted by Faith

In Christianity, Feuerbach argues, love is subordinate to faith because faith takes precedence. Consequently, love becomes secondary to faith and is inherently restricted in its scope. This restricted love, he contends, violates the essence of love, which is "freedom."[25] Feuerbach highlights this limitation in love through two perspectives. First, from God's love for humanity: while God loves humanity, God's love is confined to Christians or those who have the potential to become Christians. Second, extending from the earlier argument that loving what

[24] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 330.
[25] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 314.

God does not love equates to unbelief, Christians are obligated to love only other Christians or to love non-Christians as potential converts to Christianity.[26]

Feuerbach thus concludes that Christian love, whether from God or from humanity, is fundamentally limited to Christians. He further argues that loving others as potential Christians transforms love into a device for proselytizing, exposing the hypocrisy and contradictions within Christian love.

> For in Christianity, love is tainted by faith, it is not free, it is not apprehended truly. A love which is limited by faith is an untrue love. Love knows no law but itself; it is divine through itself; it needs not the sanction of faith; it is its own basis. The love, which is bound by faith, is a narrow-hearted, false love, contradicting the idea of love, i.e., self-contradictory - a love which has only a semblance of holiness, for it hides in itself the hatred that belongs to faith; it is only benevolent so long as faith is not injured.[27]

What, then, does Feuerbach propose as true love? According to him, true love abolishes the distinctions between Christianity and so-called paganism. True love is self-sufficient, requiring no titles or authority, as it is a universal law of nature. Love is only well-grounded, secure in its principles, guaranteed, and free when it is rooted in the essence of humanity itself.

Feuerbach argues that true love, by rejecting any limitations and overcoming all particularities, must transcend faith. Love must center on humanity as its own end and view humans as beings endowed with reason and the capacity for love. Based on this principle, Feuerbach interprets the love demonstrated by Christ not as a uniquely Christian love but as one grounded in our common human nature. To love one another simply because Christ loved us, he

[26] Furthermore, Feuerbach critiques the famous Christian commandment to "love your enemies," asserting that it applies solely to personal enemies, not to public or religious enemies, those who do not share the faith. "To love the man who does not believe in Christ is a sin against Christ; it is to love the enemy of Christ." See Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 321.
[27] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 334.

contends, is contrived and false love. It is self-evident that love neither entered human consciousness for the first time through Christianity nor is it exclusively a Christian ideal.[28]

In the final paragraph of the chapter, Feuerbach asserts that love is "the realization of the unity of the race through the medium of the moral disposition."[29] He argues that humanity as a collective infuses love into individuals, envisioning each person as inherently filled with a loving heart. Therefore, Christ, as the consciousness of love, becomes synonymous with the consciousness of humanity itself. Feuerbach professes that Christ is the one who loves humanity for humanity's sake.[30]

In this way, Feuerbach removes the divine essence and recognizes what was once understood as divine essence as, in fact, human essence. True love, according to Feuerbach, is to love humans directly for their own sake—not mediated by faith in God but grounded in the recognition of humanity's intrinsic worth. For him, this direct love for humanity, unmediated by faith, represents the essence of genuine love. Feuerbach argues that overcoming the alienation caused by faith requires loving humanity directly, without the mediation of faith or love for God. He contends that a religion of humanity and self-love restores the divine to humanity, representing the essence of true religion.[31]

In summary, Feuerbach critiques faith as inherently exclusive and judgmental, dividing believers from unbelievers and subordinating morality to dogmatic imperatives. For Feuerbach, faith generates hostility by prioritizing obligations to God above human ethical duties, creating contradictions with natural morality. This tension leads faith to justify itself through actions and

[28] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 336.
[29] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 338.
[30] Ibid.
[31] A. K. Guha, *Types of Alienation a Marxist Approach* (Kolkata: Calcutta School of Philosophical Research, 2006), 19.; Sujit Debnath, "Feuerbach's Concept of Religious Alienation and Its Influence." *Tattva Journal of Philosophy* 13, 1 (2021): 38.

love, yet Christian love, distorted by faith, becomes conditional and limited to believers or potential converts. In contrast, true love transcends faith and abolishes distinctions between belief systems. It is universal, self-sufficient, and rooted in humanity's intrinsic worth. He interprets Christ's love as grounded in common human nature, not in faith, advocating for direct love for humanity as the essence of genuine love.

III. Kierkegaard's Understanding of Faith: Ultimate Duty to God and the Teleological Suspension of the Ethical

This section focuses on Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and draws a comparison with the preceding section on "Feuerbach's Critique: The Contradiction Between Faith and Love," specifically A) Faith as a Malignant Principle with Contradiction to Morality. Several critical points align with Feuerbach and Kierkegaard's notion of faith. First, Feuerbach argues that faith's determinate and specific nature, along with its obligatory character, renders it inherently intolerant. This point aligns with Kierkegaard's concept of faith's particularity and the ultimate duty to God. Second, Feuerbach critiques Christianity for prioritizing faith to the extent that it sometimes conflicts with morality. This resonates with Kierkegaard's notion of the teleological suspension of the ethical. Let us examine each of these points in turn.

A) Faith that Requires an Absolute Duty to God

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard presents three critical questions and potential issues arising from the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac.[32] First, is there a teleological suspension

[32] "After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering

of the ethical? Second, is there an absolute duty to God? Lastly, was it ethically defensible for Abraham to conceal his undertaking from Sarah, from Eliezer, and from Isaac? This section will focus on the second question: whether there is an *absolute duty to God*. This serves as a foundational step to comprehend Kierkegaard's understanding of faith before exploring whether Kierkegaard's view resonates with Feuerbach's critique of the imperative nature of faith, which prioritizes obligations to God over obligations to humanity, as faith holds the honor of God as the utmost value.

Kierkegaard explains the relationship between the individual and God in connection to God's absolute duty. According to Kierkegaard, "the paradox can also be expressed by saying that there is an absolute duty to God, for in this relationship of duty, the single individual relates himself [*sic*] as the single individual absolutely to the absolute."[33] Through faith, the individual is mediated to the absolute through a direct relationship, which is entirely different from the usual mediation to the absolute through the universal—such as universal language, expressions, and norms. This direct relationship with God invites the concept of a personal God who engages in a specific and individual connection, contrasting with an abstract idea of God that can be

on one of the mountains that I shall show you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. And the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." And the two of them walked on together. When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. **10** Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son." See Gen 22:1-13 NRSVUE.

[33] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 61.

subsumed into the category of the universal or ethical. It is a relationship in which one becomes God's confidant, a "Lord's friend," and can address God as "You."[34]

> Thus, if one sees a person do something that does not conform to the universal, one says he [*sic*] hardly did it for God's sake, meaning thereby that he [*sic*] did it for his [*sic*] own sake. The paradox of faith has lost the intermediate factor, i.e., the universal. On the other hand, it is the expression for the highest egoism (doing the frightful deed for one's own sake); on the other hand, it is the expression for the most absolute devotion (doing it for God's sake). Faith itself cannot be mediated into the universal, for it is thereby annulled. Faith is this paradox, and the single individual is utterly unable to make himself [*sic*] intelligible to anyone.[35]

Abraham was called to believe in and love God in an incomprehensible way while simultaneously expressing his love for his son, Isaac. Yet, Abraham's decision to obey God's command to sacrifice Isaac, far from contradicting his love for his son, becomes the highest expression of that love, as well as the ultimate demonstration of his love for God. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac is not despite his love for Isaac, but precisely because of it. If he had not loved his son, there would have been no sacrifice, only an empty gesture. The depth of the act lies not in negating love, but in surrendering even love to the divine. However, such expressions of love do not necessarily align with universal standards. The same can be said of the disciples who decided to leave their families to follow Jesus. Their decision, from a universal perspective, may appear as nothing more than an act of hatred or extreme selfishness. However, the disciples acted based on their personal faith, offering no justification for their actions.[36] From a universal standpoint, both Abraham and the disciples who abandoned their families may seem

[34] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 68.
[35] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 62.
[36] Clare Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: A Reader's Guide* (London; New York: Continuum, 2010), 128.

like the greatest egoists. Ultimately, faith transcends outward expressions and resides in a realm of new inwardness, which cannot be conveyed through universal norms.

It is, therefore, inevitable for Abraham to remain silent. He does not explain his actions. This silence is not a deficiency but a fundamental aspect of faith itself. Abraham's silence signifies his isolation as the single individual who stands in an absolute relationship with God, a relationship that cannot be shared or understood by others. The movement and decision of faith are matters that only the individual can determine, comprehend, and judge. This isolation reflects the paradox of faith. While it transcends the ethical, it does not reject it. Abraham's love for Isaac is not diminished by his willingness to sacrifice him; instead, his faith allows him to reconcile this incomprehensible act of devotion to God with his deep paternal love. Faith, in this sense, both suspends and fulfills the ethical by elevating it to a higher divine purpose.

B) Faith that Suspends the Ethical

In connection with Feuerbach's critique that faith contradicts morality, this section will address the first question, "Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical (in the religious)?" To understand Kierkegaard's understanding of the ethical (morality) and the religious (faith)[37], it is essential to recognize Kierkegaard's development of the three stages of existence spheres in his

[37] While Kierkegaard's "ethical" and Feuerbach's "morality" differ in philosophical orientation and scope, both refer to universal obligations grounded in human reason and responsibility. Likewise, Kierkegaard's "religious" and Feuerbach's "faith" are mapped together here not as identical concepts, but as opposing positions on the legitimacy of transcending the ethical. Kierkegaard affirms the paradoxical necessity of this suspension; Feuerbach condemns it as a violation of the human moral essence. This comparative mapping is employed to highlight their divergent responses to the same existential problem: whether faith can ethically justify a break from universal moral law. This terminological pairing is therefore strategic rather than literal, aimed at clarifying how both thinkers grapple with the relationship between moral universality and religious particularity.

broader works: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious.[38] These stages are carefully distinguished, with each representing a distinct mode of human existence and the progression toward ultimate faith. The very fact that Kierkegaard distinguishes between the ethical and the religious suggests that these spheres possess independent characteristics and distinct domains. This implies the possibility of approving Feuerbach's critique that faith contradicts or at least differs from morality.

Kierkegaard develops his argument by focusing on the event of Abraham going to Mount Moriah to sacrifice Isaac, highlighting the distinction between the ethical and the religious as expressions or categories. "The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he intended to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he intended to sacrifice Isaac. But in this contradiction lies precisely the anxiety that indeed can make a person sleepless."[39] A close examination of each category will illuminate the conceptual framework that underlies the tension between the ethical and the religious.

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard's three problems all rest on the shared premise that the ethical is universal.[40]

> The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone. (…) Defined immediately as a sensuous and psychical being, the single individual is the particular that has its telos in the universal, and it is his [*sic*] ethical task constantly to express himself [*sic*] in this, to annul his [*sic*] particularity in order to become the universal.[41]

[38] Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 40.
[39] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 24.
[40] Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: A Reader's Guide*, 120.
[41] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 46.

Particularity and universality are opposing concepts that stand in contrast to one another. The ethical represents universality—what is whole, inclusive, and communal. Kant, who first interpreted ethics as grounded in universality, offers an interpretation of the ethical that diverges from Kierkegaard's perspective on Abraham. Kant's moral theory emphasizes that morality is inherently universal and applies equally to all people at all times. For Kant, the function and commands of reason are equally accessible and impartial to everyone, making rationality inherently tied to universality.[42] Accordingly, Kant argues that religion is not the foundation of ethics and is legitimate only when it is based on ethics, thereby remaining within the boundaries of reason. Similarly, for Kierkegaard, who follows this framework of reason and ethics, the universality of ethics also implies that individuals can be mediated through ethics. This is the realm where language and concepts, which enable understanding and communication, operate.[43] In other words, a common morality is crucial for helping us fulfill our social obligations and justify our actions to others and ourselves.[44] Within Kant's framework, which grants the highest authority to human reason and confines religion within the boundaries of reason, any divine command that cannot be rationally understood by humans cannot be accepted and, consequently, ceases to be considered a command of God. Kant views Abraham's act of intending to sacrifice Isaac as a violation of the ethical and, therefore, a wrongful act.[45]

On the other hand, Kierkegaard, in *A Tribute to Abraham*, praises Abraham's act of sacrificing Isaac, linking it to his faith and decisive commitment. Kierkegaard even confesses that he himself would not dare to perform such an act. Kierkegaard explains the perspective of

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[42] Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason: And Other Writings*, eds. Allen W Wood and George Di Giovanni, 1st edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 81.
[43] Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: A Reader's Guide,* 103.
[44] Edward F. Mooney, *Ethics, Love, and Faith in Kierkegaard: Philosophical Engagements* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 20.
[45] Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason: And Other Writings*, 179-180.

faith that considers the possibility of "the teleological suspension of the ethical" by highlighting the difference between the ethical and the religious expression of Abraham's act of sacrificing Isaac. What does it mean that faith *suspends* the ethical?

The religious suspending the ethical is relevant to the paradoxical feature of faith. Kierkegaard distinguishes between the tragic hero and Abraham to illustrate the paradox of faith. The tragic hero renounces finite desires for a higher, universal ethical purpose and remains within the ethical sphere. In contrast, Abraham transcends the ethical by believing in the absurd—a full commitment to God's promise despite actions that defy universal moral norms. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac reflects this paradoxical faith. He both suspends the ethical and believes in the restoration of Isaac, acting as a particular individual who is higher than the universal.[46]

> Faith is exactly this paradox, that the single individual is higher than the universal, but in such a way, mind you, that the movement is repeated, so that after having been in the universal he now as the particular keeps to himself as higher than the universal.[47]

Kierkegaard's concept of the teleological suspension of the ethical challenges the universality of ethics by asserting that faith, as an absolute relationship with God, surpasses and redefines ethical norms. For Abraham, the ethical command, "not to kill," is suspended for a higher divine purpose, yet this suspension does not negate the ethical. It repositions it within the context of faith. In other words, the ethical becomes subordinate to the religious sphere, where the individual relates absolutely to the divine.

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[46] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 51.
[47] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 47.

This suspension raises several profound implications. First, it indicates that faith is not accessible through reason or shared moral principles but is deeply personal and particular. Abraham's act cannot be justified or explained within the universal framework of the ethical. Second, it reframes morality as insufficient to fully encompass the human-divine relationship, suggesting that true faith requires transcending even the highest ethical ideals. Last, suspending the ethical does not merely negate or eliminate it. Instead, it surpasses the ethical in a way that assigns it a role within a larger framework. In this process, the ethical is not destroyed but is placed into a new, relative context.[48]

To further clarify Kierkegaard's view, this ethical is suspended not in a permanent rejection, but in a singular, decisive moment where the individual stands absolutely before God. This suspension is not a denial of the ethical but a transposition of it into a higher relational frame. The religious state is thus not simply an interruption of moral duty, but an existential condition in which faith reorders the ethical from within. While such a moment may resemble madness in its irrationality and solitude, it is distinguished by the individual's grounding in a divine command, rather than subjective delusion.

IV. Kierkegaard's Understanding of Love: Neighborly Love and Unconditional Love

In the chapter "Our Duty to Love Those We See," in *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard begins with the need for love, which he sees as deeply grounded in human nature. He writes, "So deeply is love grounded in the nature of man [*sic*], so essentially does it belong to man [*sic*]." Love, for Kierkegaard, is not merely a superficial desire but an essential component of what it means to be

[48] Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: A Reader's Guide,* 102.

human. Remarkably, he even acknowledges that Christ, having taken on human form, experienced the human need both to love and to be loved. This underscores the profound significance of love as a foundational aspect of human existence, rooted in both divine and human experience.

For Kierkegaard, then, love is not simply an emotional impulse but a central category of both theological reflection and ethical life. This is precisely the concern of *Works of Love*, where Kierkegaard, writing under his own name,[49] offers a sustained meditation on the nature and demands of Christian love. The book is divided into two parts: the first engages with the theoretical and spiritual foundations of love, while the second considers its concrete expressions and ethical implications. This paper will focus primarily on the former, in order to explore how Kierkegaard redefines love not as an aesthetic feeling, but as a spiritual task. Kierkegaard's key stance that highlights the aspect of love as a practice appears in the *Foreword*, where he states, "These are *Christian reflections*; therefore, they are not about *love* but about the *works of love.*"[50] This is love rooted in faith, expressed through action, and ultimately realized as an obligation to love one's neighbor. In doing so, Kierkegaard challenges the limitations of preferential love and offers a radical, boundless vision of neighborly love as the true expression of Christian ethics.

[49] Kierkegaard explicitly states in his 1848 journal that "henceforth it will be indefensible to use [indirect communication]" in addressing Christianity, committing instead "to step forth definitely and directly in character, as one who has wanted and wants to serve the cause of Christianity." See Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, vol. 6, entry 6231, 41–42. However, scholars like Mark Stapp argue that this "directness" remains paradoxical: even in speaking under his own name, Kierkegaard maintains a kind of indirectness. His authorial identity becomes another mask, and the text itself invites the reader into reflection rather than instruction. Thus, *Works of Love* is both a sincere act of Christian witness and a continuation of Kierkegaard's strategy of provoking the reader into self-examination. See Mark Stapp, *Kierkegaard's Work of Love* (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2009), 197-198.

[50] Luther emphasized that faith must be known through love, countering the tendency of his time to render love invisible. From a Christian perspective, love is inherently an action, a practice of love. Similarly, Kierkegaard, in this context, expresses disillusionment with the fading essence of true Christian love and affirms that genuine Christian love is love in action, something that must be visible and tangible. See Martin Luther, *Sermon on Matthew 6:24-34*, the Fifteenth Sunday After Trinity, Postille, I, 520.

A) Love as Neighborly Love

Kierkegaard begins with the foundational premise of Christian love: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."[51] Before turning to the concept of neighborly love, it is important to recognize that Christianity clearly presupposes *self-love*. When it commands loving one's neighbor as oneself, it assumes that individuals naturally possess an inherent tendency to love themselves, a disposition that requires no instruction or reinforcement. This self-love is a key term that distinguishes neighborly love from other forms of love, such as erotic love and friendship.

> The same holds true of friendship as of erotic love, insofar as this also is based on favoritism: to love this single human being above all others, to love him [*sic*] in distinction from all others. The object of both erotic love and friendship has therefore also the favorite's name, the beloved, the friend, who is loved in distinction from the rest of the world. On the other hand, the Christian teaching is to love one's neighbor, to love all mankind [*sic*], all men [*sic*], even enemies, and not to make exceptions, neither in favoritism nor in aversion.[52]

Erotic love is driven by impulse, and friendship is based on inclination. However, both impulse and inclination are natural determinations that are inherently selfish. In other words, erotic love and friendship conceal self-love within them, and this self-love is particularly evident in proportion to the fervor of these preferential loves. Such preferences inherently carry a

[51] "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' See Matthew 22:36-38 NRSVUE. Here, we see that Kierkegaard, in this work, focuses not on the first commandment to love God, but on the second commandment: to love your neighbor as yourself—an emphasis on interpersonal love. In other words, this book is more centered on neighborly love than on faith as love directed toward God. Thus, the essence of faith or the relationship between faith and morality can be explored through *Fear and Trembling*, while neighborly love is best understood through *Works of Love*.

[52] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses,* 36.

stubbornness to impose one's own will. Thus, because erotic love and friendship are forms of concealed self-love, they do not oppose instinct but instead align perfectly with natural impulses.[53] On the other hand, Kierkegaard asserts that the purpose of Christianity is to take self-love away from humans.[54] What does this mean? This is closely related to Kierkegaard's explanation of the concept of the neighbor.

According to Kierkegaard, the concept of the neighbor signifies a duplication of one's own self and is manifold in nature because the neighbor encompasses all human beings. However, self-love cannot tolerate this duplication. Duplication implies the abandonment of erotic love, as erotic love inherently establishes an exclusive, one-on-one relationship. In contrast, in neighborly love, if there are two people, both are neighbors; if there are millions, all are neighbors.[55] Continuing, in the story where a Pharisee asks Jesus about who his neighbor is, Kierkegaard points out that knowing one's duty makes it easy to recognize who the neighbor is. The key message of this story, according to Kierkegaard, is that the person toward whom one has a duty is one's neighbor. Moreover, the essence of neighborly love is not in asking who the neighbor is, but in *being* a neighbor oneself.[56]

Unlike erotic love and friendship, which are based on natural impulses and tend toward favoritism and exclusivity, neighborly love resists partiality and commands us to love all equally. Thus, neighborly love comes to us in the form of a command and as a *duty*. The Christian characteristic of neighborly love, therefore, lies in the fact that love is an obligation. In this way,

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[53] Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, vol. 4, eds. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967–1978), entry no. 4447.
[54] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses,* 34.
[55] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses,* 37-38.
[56] Ibid.

the concept of the neighbor aligns with the act of loving as a duty. This is rather paradoxical since preference and inclination are *commanded* and *obligated*.[57]

> 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 [*sic*] neighbor, only then is the selfishness of preferential love rooted out and the equality of the eternal preserved.[58]

Erotic love and friendship, which are based on favoritism, are the most passionate forms of love in that they focus on loving just one person. This passion operates exclusively in an either/or manner: it is either this person or not. Finding that one person to love or a like-minded friend becomes a matter of *fortune*. Fortune, however, carries no obligation. The only task is to properly appreciate one's good luck. In contrast, Christian love is the love of all. If someone claims to embody Christian love yet wishes to exclude even a single person from that love, it is not Christian love. When neighborly love becomes an obligation, it transforms into an *ethical* task.[59] Therefore, Christ's command to love one's *enemies* can also be understood in relation to the egalitarian nature of neighborly love. One who truly loves their neighbor shows no partiality or distinction, treating even their enemies equally. The concept of the neighbor represents the absence of any distinguishable differences between people and embodies eternal equality before God.[60]

Kierkegaard was well aware that practicing such egalitarian love in this world is far from easy. He acknowledges that living an exclusive life or retreating into quiet solitude is often much

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[57] M. Jamie. Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard's Works of Love* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2001), 36.
[58] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses,* 58.
[59] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses,* 63-64.
[60] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses,* 79.

easier and more comfortable. Practicing egalitarian love is a challenging task on this earth, one that can appear absurd, frustrating, and inefficient. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard asserts that this is the highest thing a person can strive to achieve.[61] In addition, Kierkegaard mentions that the commandment to love is a reminder that one can love since the commandment is "received" from God to borrow from Luther's expression.[62]

In summary, Kierkegaard contrasts Christian neighborly love with erotic love and friendship, highlighting its universal scope and obligatory character. Unlike the partiality and self-centeredness inherent in erotic love and friendship, neighborly love rises above personal preferences and requires love for everyone, even enemies. This love is not guided by natural instincts but is a moral and spiritual responsibility that upholds eternal equality before God. Despite the difficulties and impracticality of practicing such impartial love, Kierkegaard argues that it represents the highest human aspiration, as it eradicates selfishness and secures the enduring nature of love.

B) Love as Boundless Love

> When this is the duty, the task is not: to find – the lovable object; but the task is: to find the object already given or chosen – lovable, and to be able to continue finding him [*sic*] lovable, no matter how he [*sic*] becomes changed.[63]

We have seen in the above section that love as a duty refers specifically to neighborly love, but it ultimately leads to unconditional love. As Kierkegaard states, "It is the duty, the first condition, in order that in loving you may eventually reach the point of loving the men [*sic*] you

[61] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses,* 95.
[62] M. Jamie. Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard's Works of Love,* 38.
[63] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses,* 158.

see."[64] This implies that fulfilling the duty to love one's neighbor is the necessary starting point for developing a love that transcends conditions and becomes truly unconditional. To love the people we *see* means to love them exactly as they are, without projecting expectations or aspirations of what they ought to be. It requires loving them as they appear, in their unaltered reality. Kierkegaard emphasizes that even if the person we see possesses a kind of perfection worthy of love, this perfection is not a human achievement. Rather, it is a reflection of something beyond human effort, underscoring the unmerited nature of love.

Kierkegaard argues that judging, examining, testing, or criticizing the person one loves is akin to introducing a critical, interrogating, and cold outside observer into the one-on-one relationship, which fundamentally undermines the essence of love. Such actions distort the purity of the bond and indicate that true love is absent. Genuine and sincere love is characterized by loving the other exactly as they are, without conditions or external interference.

Such unconditional love ultimately leads to a love without limits. It transcends all boundaries and conditions, embracing the other wholly and infinitely without restriction or qualification. This boundless nature of love reflects its deepest and most authentic expression. "There is no limit to love. If the duty is to be fulfilled, love must be limitless. It is unchanged, no matter how the object becomes changed."[65] A prime example of this boundless love is Jesus, and a concrete instance can be seen in the story of Peter's betrayal. Despite Peter denying his Master at a moment of great vulnerability when Jesus faced the loss of his life, Jesus's response was not rejection but restoration. Jesus transformed Peter, the one who had denied him, into his most passionate supporter and entrusted him with the continuation of his mission. This demonstrates

[64] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses,* 161.
[65] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses,* 164.

the boundless love Christ showed toward Peter, a love that transcended betrayal and empowered redemption.[66]

To love others based on the standard of whether they are worthy of love or not is to focus on their lack of value and imperfection. In such love, the object of affection is not the person's inherent flaws or virtues, but rather their perceived excellence or perfection. In contrast, from a Christian perspective, to love means to love the person as they appear, in their current state—not their perfection. Christian love accepts the weaknesses and imperfections of the beloved and remains steadfast through all changes. Thus, for the Christian, there are no obstacles of needing to seek out perfect individuals for love. The only duty is to infinitely love the person they encounter as they are.[67]

In short, true love, according to Kierkegaard, is not about seeking worthiness or external conditions but about loving others as they are. This unconditional love transcends all boundaries and imperfections, embracing the weaknesses and changes in others. Christian love, exemplified by Jesus's boundless love for Peter despite his betrayal, reflects a love without limits. It calls for embracing others equally and infinitely, rooted in the Christian imperative to love one's neighbor as oneself.

V. Dialogue Between Feuerbach and Kierkegaard

Having examined their respective positions on faith and love, this final section brings Feuerbach and Kierkegaard into direct conversation. Feuerbach and Kierkegaard share several points of overlap but also critical divergences. Moreover, Kierkegaard himself reveals contradictory attitudes within his own authorship. This dialogue section will first compare

[66] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses,* 168.
[67] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses,* 169.

Feuerbach's and Kierkegaard's distinct understandings of ethics (specifically, love), then explore their convergence in the *Essence of Christianity* and *Fear and Trembling,* since they have similar ideas of the contradiction between love and faith. Finally, I will examine the anthropological foundations underlying their divergence, concluding with a reflection on the often-overlooked continuity between *Fear and Trembling* and *Works of Love* in Kierkegaard's thought.

A) From Human Sentiment to Divine Command: Rethinking Love as Ethics

One of the clearest points of divergence between Feuerbach and Kierkegaard lies in their respective conceptions of ethics—especially as expressed through the notion of love. Although both thinkers articulate a critique of abstract, systematized philosophy and are associated with a break from Hegelian idealism, their understanding of what constitutes ethical love and how it should function within human life reveals significant philosophical and theological differences.

Feuerbach maintains a fundamentally humanistic and optimistic view of ethics. For him, ethics—especially as embodied in love—is grounded in human nature itself. Love is not a supernatural or transcendent ideal, but rather a natural expression of the human capacity for empathy, relationality, and moral reasoning. In *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach argues that religion alienates human beings from their own ethical capacities by projecting them onto an imagined divine being.[68] Human beings become conscious of their limits only through the awareness of their species' infinitude which is an awareness that arises from feeling, conscience,

[68] "God is the manifested inward nature, the expressed self of a man[*sic*] (…) The more subjective God is, the more completely does man divest himself of his subjectivity, because God is, *per se*, his relinquished self, the possession of which he however again vindicates to himself." See Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2008), 12-13, 31. I used a different version of *The Essence of Christianity* since the former version I cited did not have the first two chapters which constitute the introduction of the book.

or reflective thought. Religion, then, is the externalization of this inner human perfection. However, when a person forgets that this ideal is their own and instead attributes it to a supernatural being, they become estranged from their true nature. This alienation distorts the ethical life by displacing the source of love and morality from within the human to something external and inaccessible.[69]

Thus, instead of enhancing ethical life, religious love distorts it by displacing human affection and moral responsibility onto an abstract transcendent source. For Feuerbach, the ethical life flourishes best when it is grounded in the immanent reality of human nature, rather than subordinated to the demands of faith. Faith, as he sees it, introduces separation and hierarchy by dividing people into saved and unsaved, believers and non-believers. It therefore undermines the universality of love. In this framework, the essence of ethics lies in the affirmation of the human other as such, without recourse to theological justification.

Kierkegaard's conception of ethics is different from Feuerbach's. In *Fear and Trembling*, he famously introduces the notion of the "teleological suspension of the ethical," in which faith appears to override the ethical duties grounded in universal human morality. The figure of Abraham, who is willing to sacrifice his son Isaac in obedience to a divine command, exemplifies this paradox. Here, the ethical is understood in a Kantian or Hegelian sense as the universal moral law that governs human relationships and communal life. In this context, faith is not an extension of the ethical but a *rupture* within it. It represents an absolute relation to the Absolute that transcends all finite ethical considerations. Importantly, Kierkegaard does not deny the legitimacy of ethical life; rather, he insists that faith cannot be judged by ethical standards

[69] Debnath, "Feuerbach's Concept of Religious Alienation and Its Influence," 34.

because it operates on a qualitatively different plane. The ethical is not dismissed, but its sovereignty is interrupted by a higher command.

However, Kierkegaard's later work, *Works of Love,* presents a significantly different picture of the relationship between faith and ethics. In this text, love is not presented as something that transcends the ethical but as the very form of ethical responsibility itself, rooted in the divine command to "love your neighbor as yourself." Unlike preferential love, which arises from human inclinations and is inherently selective, neighborly love is an unconditional and infinite duty. It is grounded not in sentiment or mutual attraction but in obedience to God's will. This shift signals a transformation in Kierkegaard's understanding of ethics: from a universal and rational system (as seen in *Fear and Trembling*) to a theologically grounded practice of love as a divine obligation. Faith no longer suspends the ethical; rather, it reconstitutes it by redefining the ground and scope of ethical responsibility. Love, in *Works of Love*, is inseparable from duty.

This movement from a faith that suspends the ethical to a faith that grounds it reveals an important shift within Kierkegaard's authorship. Yet, a surprising structural similarity emerges when comparing his earlier and later works alongside Feuerbach. What becomes apparent in this contrast is that Feuerbach's conception of ethics and Kierkegaard's in *Fear and Trembling* are surprisingly similar in structure: both assume a framework in which ethical norms are shaped by human universality, rationality, and communal obligations. They differ most starkly in the later Kierkegaard, for whom love becomes fundamentally theological. *Works of Love* redefines ethics not as something discoverable through human reason or natural feeling, but as something commanded, unchosen, and divinely grounded.

These divergent ethical accounts are not free-floating ideas but rest on more fundamental views about human nature. The next section will explore how Feuerbach's and Kierkegaard's

respective anthropologies establish the conditions under which love as ethics is either naturally possible or divinely necessitated.

B) The Human Condition as Ethical Ground: Contrasting Anthropologies

The divergent ethical visions of Feuerbach and Kierkegaard stem from fundamentally different understandings of human nature. Their anthropology determines not only what kind of ethical life is possible, but whether love must be natural or commanded.

Feuerbach assumes a positive anthropology: human beings are inherently capable of moral and emotional development. He sees no essential gap between human nature and ethical action. In doing so, he overlooks the concrete realities of human limitations, such as death and evil, which are undeniable aspects of human existence.[70] Theology, for Feuerbach, is simply anthropology in disguise. God is the projection of the human ideal. In this framework, love emerges organically from the essence of what it means to be human. Religion, by positing a divine source of morality, corrupts rather than supports ethical development. True love must be recovered by returning to humanity itself, rather than appealing to a transcendent authority.

Kierkegaard, however, insists on the radical insufficiency of human nature. In *Works of Love*, he highlights how human love, even when seemingly virtuous, is often corrupted by self-love, preference, or pride. Left to itself, human love remains conditional and selective. Hence, divine command is not a restriction upon love, but it is the very condition of possibility. Kierkegaard's anthropology asserts that without the command to love the neighbor, humanity remains imprisoned in partiality. What appears as altruism is often a masked form of egoism.

[70] Sung-Yeop Jo, "A Review On Barth-Feuerbach Confrontation: Is God Really The Projection Of Human Being?" *Sinhak Sasang*, 186 (2019): 432-433.

This perspective is deepened in *Fear and Trembling*, where Kierkegaard argues that faith, in its true form, transcends any ethical system grounded in universal human norms. Abraham's act, from this angle, becomes ethically unintelligible unless one accepts the existence of a higher, divine source of obligation. It transcends the ethical by assigning it a role within a higher framework. In this movement, the ethical is neither destroyed nor dismissed; rather, it is relativized within a new, elevated context.[71] As Kierkegaard puts it, "whereas whatever is suspended is not forfeited but on the contrary is preserved in the higher, which is its teleos."[72] Kierkegaard sees it as a critique of the assumption that ethics can be entirely grounded in human nature. Love, therefore, must be received through faith, not produced by human sentiment.

This issue can be reapproached through their differing understandings of sin. For Feuerbach, sin is a theological construct that enforces a dualism between the divine and the human, thereby alienating individuals from their own essence. He contends that Christianity universalizes guilt, placing all individuals under the same condemnation and denying their particularity.[73] Feuerbach thus understands sin as a product of religious ideology that must be overcome to restore humanity to itself. For Feuerbach, there is no infinite qualitative difference between God and humanity. Christian theology, grounded in such a difference, is therefore fundamentally in error.[74] There is no essential gap between the human and the divine, since God is nothing more than the idealized projection of human nature. On the other hand, Kierkegaard understands sin as estrangement from God, which is a condition that cannot be rectified by human resources alone.

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[71] Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: A Reader's Guide*, 102.
[72] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 47.
[73] "But Christianity extinguishes this qualitative distinction; it sets the same stamp on all men alike, and regards them as one and the same individual, because it knows no distinction between the species and the individual: it has one and the same means of salvation for all men, it sees one and the same original sin in all." See Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 121.
[74] Dritëro Demjaha and Elizabeth X. Li, "Feuerbach and Kierkegaard on Sin as Infinite Qualitative Difference," *Neue Zeitschrift Für Systematische Theologie Und Religionsphilosophie* 65, no. 3 (2023): 390.

Kierkegaard holds that the qualitative difference between God and humanity is fundamental, and that sin marks the very reality of this gap.[75] As a result, his anthropology is inevitably pessimistic, grounded in a deep contemplation of human sinfulness.

This anthropological disagreement explains why Kierkegaard's ethics culminate in divine command, while Feuerbach's ethics rely on human autonomy. One sees the root problem as alienation from ourselves (Feuerbach), the other as alienation from God (Kierkegaard). Consequently, their accounts of love and ethics cannot be reconciled at the level of human nature. They begin from opposite premises.

While the ethical differences between Feuerbach and Kierkegaard can be traced to their opposing views of human nature, Kierkegaard's own thought is not without internal complexity. His writings seem, at times, to present competing visions of ethics. The final section considers how *Fear and Trembling* and *Works of Love* unfold a coherent theological movement from the deconstruction of ethics to its divine reconstruction through love.

C) From Rupture to Reconstruction: Reconciling *Fear and Trembling* and *Works of Love*

At a glance, *Fear and Trembling* and *Works of Love* may appear to articulate incompatible ethical visions. The former presents faith as a movement that breaks with ethical universality, while the latter frames love as an ethical duty grounded in divine command and faith. This has led many scholars to read the two works as either contradictory or reflective of separate phases in

[75] "The teaching about sin—that you and I are sinners—a teaching that unconditionally splits up the crowd, confirms the qualitative difference between God and man[*sic*] more radically than ever before, for again only God can do this; sin is indeed: before God. (…) God and man[*sic*] are two qualities separated by an infinite qualitative difference." See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 121, 126. For the purpose of examining Kierkegaard's understanding of sin, I have chosen to draw from *The Sickness unto Death*, as it is a work in which he discusses sin more explicitly compared to *Fear and Trembling* and *Works of Love*.

Kierkegaard's authorship. However, when considered dialectically, the two works reveal a deep structural continuity.

In *Fear and Trembling*, the "teleological suspension of the ethical" refers to the idea that religious faith may require actions that defy moral norms. Abraham's story serves not as a license for ethical relativism but as a demonstration that ethics is incomplete when unbound by its divine origin. The knight of faith does not abolish ethics but reorients it around God's absolute demand, beyond the grasp of rational mediation.

In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard no longer focuses on the exceptional individual but on the everyday command given to all: love your neighbor. The same movement of faith that allows Abraham to transcend the ethical now grounds the ethical in divine command. What was suspended in *Fear and Trembling* is reestablished in *Works of Love*—not as a return to human moralism, but as a faith-based ethic that moves from rupture to obligation. The ethical is no longer autonomous, but theological in origin.

This continuity is rooted in Kierkegaard's anthropology. Both texts reject the sufficiency of human nature, arguing that love requires something more than feeling or inclination. In *Fear and Trembling*, the individual relates absolutely to God; in *Works of Love*, that relationship issues in the universal demand to love others. Sharon Krishek has argued that *Works of Love* can only be fully understood through the existential logic of *Fear and Trembling*.[76] The leap of faith that first suspends the ethical ultimately returns to it, now grounded in divine responsibility. Thus, the tension between these two works is not a contradiction but a dialectical movement: from disruption of ethical autonomy to the reconstruction of a theological ethic. Kierkegaard's ethics unfold across these two texts, not in conflict, but in progression.

[76] Krishek, "Two Forms of Love: The Problem of Preferential Love in Kierkegaard's Works of Love," 613.

IV. Conclusion

This thesis has examined the tension between faith and love in Christian theology by engaging the critique of Ludwig Feuerbach and the response offered by Søren Kierkegaard. At the heart of this inquiry lies a fundamental ethical concern: Can faith, which often appears to divide and exclude, be reconciled with the universal imperative to love one's neighbor? While Feuerbach answers in the negative—arguing that faith, by its very structure, distorts love into a tool of exclusion—Kierkegaard responds with a more paradoxical and ultimately constructive theological vision.

Through a close reading of *The Essence of Christianity*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *Works of Love*, this paper has demonstrated that Feuerbach and Kierkegaard differ not only in their understanding of love and ethics, but more fundamentally in their anthropological assumptions. Feuerbach grounds ethics in an optimistic view of human nature, claiming that love is a natural outgrowth of human relationality and reason. In contrast, Kierkegaard adopts a more tragic anthropology, highlighting the insufficiency of human love and the necessity of divine command. Where Feuerbach locates the problem externally—in religion's alienation from humanity—Kierkegaard locates it internally—in humanity's alienation from God.

The analysis also sought to address an internal tension within Kierkegaard's authorship: the apparent disjunction between *Fear and Trembling*'s notion of the "teleological suspension of the ethical" and *Works of Love*'s theological ethics of neighborly love. However, this study has argued that the two texts, rather than contradicting each other, form a coherent dialectical movement. *Fear and Trembling* deconstructs autonomous ethical reason by exposing its limitations before God, while *Works of Love* reconstructs ethics as grounded in divine command and spiritual responsibility. Love, for Kierkegaard, is no longer a feeling to be cultivated, but a

duty to be received. This shift reflects a profound reconfiguration of ethics within a theological frame.

The academic contribution of this thesis lies in several areas. First, it brings Feuerbach and Kierkegaard into direct dialogue on the issue of love, an intersection rarely explored in current scholarship. Second, it proposes an integrated reading of *Fear and Trembling* and *Works of Love*, showing how the latter builds upon and redeems the existential rupture articulated in the former.

Yet this inquiry also raises further questions. Can the faith-based love described in *Works of Love* ultimately respond to Feuerbach's critique of the contradiction between faith and love? If their divergent views are grounded in fundamentally different anthropological assumptions, is reconciliation between them even possible? And if faith inevitably conflicts with collective or individual reason, how can one address the religious discrimination and violence that arise not only at the level of the individual but within entire communities? Although Kierkegaard articulates a vision of love grounded in Christian faith, he ultimately does not move beyond Christianity itself. In this way, his account may still contain the very seeds of the exclusivist love that Feuerbach critiques.

These unresolved questions point toward promising areas for further research. Future work must consider whether Kierkegaardian love, despite being framed as a "Christian reflection," can be made applicable and meaningful in interreligious discourse. Can this model of neighborly love, grounded in divine command, extend its reach beyond the Christian tradition and serve as a viable ethical framework in pluralistic contexts?

While definitive answers may remain elusive, this thesis has sought to show that faith does not inherently undermine love, as Feuerbach feared. Rather, when rightly understood, faith

may serve as the very ground for a love that is universal, unchosen, and unlimited. If Kierkegaard is correct, then the love of neighbor begins not in human sentiment, but in divine calling, and perhaps it is precisely this divine origin that gives such love the strength to endure when sentiment fails.

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