LEVINAS AND KIERKEGAARD: CRITICAL COMPANIONS

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For the Other.
With the appearance of the human—and this is my entire philosophy—there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other. That is unreasonable. Man is an unreasonable animal.

-- Levinas
Recent interest in the relation between Levinas and Kierkegaard has indicated similarities regarding their critique of philosophy, account of transcendence, and promotion of a separated subjectivity. Despite these similarities, Levinas critiques Kierkegaardian thought of endorsing egoism and violence. There is wide support for the position that Levinas’s critique of Kierkegaard is based on a misunderstanding, and many point to the authored *Works of Love* as a text that eradicates or greatly mitigates Levinas’s concerns. I contend that Levinas’s concern over Kierkegaard in light of his own ethical project is merited and cannot be relegated to an instance of friendly fire or explained away by the supposition that Levinas is merely a bad reader of Kierkegaard, failing to distinguish between pseudonymous and authored texts. To show Levinas’s critique of Kierkegaard can be justified, I outline the basic ethical project of Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*, consider his criticism of Kierkegaard, examine *Fear and Trembling* (the work of Kierkegaard’s that Levinas most frequently criticizes) and examine the authored *Works of Love*. Initially *Works of Love* does appear to dispel Levinas’s concerns since renunciation of the self is promoted, contesting the claim of egoism, and an emphasis on love opposes the “violence” of the God-relation. However, residue of Levinas’s concerns regarding Kierkegaardian thought remains in *Works of Love*. This residue leaves the text, and Kierkegaardian ethics, open to the reproof of Levinas’s initial criticisms and is found primarily in the “as yourself” aspect of the love command, the salvation of the religious individual, and God’s position as the “middle term” or mediator between individuals.
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INTRODUCTION

Emmanuel Levinas’s project of ethics as first philosophy is a unique venture, one in which he may initially appear to remain unaccompanied. However, Soren Kierkegaard’s thought gives the impression of concurring with Levinas’s in certain respects. As Michael Weston states, “of all modern European thinkers, Levinas perhaps is closest to Kierkegaard.”¹ The relationship between Kierkegaard and Levinas has become one of great interest lately. John J. Davenport notes scholars have recently argued there is a close connection between Levinas’s and Kierkegaard’s ethics.² This interest is due to perceived similarities in regards to how each view philosophy and being and how each gives an account of transcendence that cannot be encompassed within these but must be revealed and related to by a living individual.

Levinas and Kierkegaard are companions insofar as they are both critics of the totalizing nature of philosophy. They both critique philosophy for subordinating or forgetting the existing individual and the “first-person position” from which the individual exists.³ Their thought incorporates a resistance to the totalizing and reductive nature of traditional philosophy and religion, promoting subjectivity as separated from and irreducible to this totality and endorsing an exterior beyond the totality of ontology, which commands, and in a sense creates, the subject as unique.⁴

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¹ Michael Weston, “Philosophy Always Comes too Late: Levinas and Kierkegaard,” in Kierkegaard and Modern Continental Thought: An Introduction (New York: Routledge, 1994), 156, see also page 167.
John Llewelyn identifies their similarity in terms of making a space for “the ethico-religious,” which induces the unique subject in the first person, a presentment shared by Stephen Minister, who concludes this “ethico-religious subjectivity” is the focus of their work. Similarly, Jeffrey Dudiak finds the bond between Kierkegaard and Levinas to be located “in a shared ethico-religious space” in which the totality is broken in upon by a transcendent other.

A similarity between their accounts in the structure and development of an individual has also been professed. Kierkegaard outlined three stages of existence—the aesthetic, ethical, and religious—whose structure and progressive development appear similar to Levinas’s phenomenological description in *Totality and Infinity* of the sensible subject of enjoyment, the subject of philosophy and politics, and the ethical subject as for-the-Other. Weston notes the similarity between them in their starting point of the enjoying or aesthetic ‘I’, which for both Levinas and Kierkegaard marks the first appearance of a resistance to the system via the separation of the subject. Merold Westphal proposes a broader similarity in the movement through these apparently corresponding stages.

Levinas and Kierkegaard are companions in their criticism of totalizing systems of thought, and yet there are differences in how each approaches this criticism. These differences lead Levinas to question Kierkegaard’s thought. Although Levinas is aware of a certain similarity, and to that extent a level of companionship, between Kierkegaard’s project and his own, he rejects Kierkegaard, perceiving in his thought an endorsement of a separated

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7 Weston, “Philosophy,” 170.

subject that is ultimately egoistic and of a resistance to totality that harbors or maintains a violence.

This paper will focus on Levinas’s criticism of Kierkegaard. I contend that Levinas’s concern over Kierkegaardian thought in light of his own ethical project should not be relegated to an instance of friendly fire or explained away by the supposition that Levinas is merely a bad reader of Kierkegaard, failing to differentiate between pseudonymous and authored texts. This is not to say that Kierkegaardian thought is unable to call Levinasian thought into question, and many of the recent forays into the relation between these thinkers have considered their relation from this perspective. However, the focus of this paper will be on determining whether a Levinasian critique of Kierkegaard can be salvaged or warranted and so will not be primarily concerned with critiques of Levinas by Kierkegaardian thinkers, though they will appear intermittently to further the purposes of this project.

To show a case can be made against Kierkegaard on Levinas’s behalf, it is necessary to: outline the basic project of Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*; consider his criticism of Kierkegaard; and examine *Fear and Trembling*, the work of Kierkegaard that Levinas most frequently criticizes. After assessing the basis for his concerns within *Fear and Trembling*, an investigation for a basis within the authored works will be undertaken to determine whether there remains any residue of what Levinas finds so troublesome within Kierkegaard as represented in *Fear and Trembling*.

*Works of Love* will be analyzed through the lens of a Levinasian critique since, of the authored works, it is the best candidate for this project, being aligned with Levinas’s own thought in its dealings with the love of the neighbor and the closest Kierkegaard comes to outlining an ethics. It has also been cited most often as the work that can undermine Levinas’s critique of Kierkegaard. In the secondary literature, there is wide support for the position that Levinas’s critique of Kierkegaard is based on a misunderstanding, and many point to the authored *Works of Love* as a text which, in its seeming similarity to Levinas’s own ethics and more straightforward portrayal of Kierkegaard’s position, eradicates or greatly mitigates Levinas’s concerns.

Merold Westphal claims Levinas’s critique is unfounded because it misunderstands Kierkegaard’s view of ethics and faith. Westphal believes this misunderstanding is a byproduct of Levinas’s selective focus on certain pseudonymous works, such as *Fear and
Trembling, and a concomitant unfamiliarity or ignorance of authored texts. It is Westphal’s contention that Levinas would not have critiqued Kierkegaard had he considered *Works of Love*. Michael R. Paradiso-Michau agrees that Levinas would find no reason to criticize Kierkegaard if he considered the context of the Kierkegaardian corpus, particularly *Works of Love*, since it is ostensibly compatible with Levinas’s own ethical project. Aaaron J. Simmons argues Levinas’s critique is “unpalatable” once *Works of Love* is considered and claims Levinas’s dismissal of Kierkegaard is largely based on his ignorance of this text. Robyn Brothers and Brian T. Prosser also note the similarity between *Works of Love* and Levinasian ethics, and Arroyo attests to this similarity, proposing that the uniqueness of Levinasian ethics may find its complement in *Works of Love*. Similarly, Jeffrey Dudiak wonders whether *Works of Love* would alter Levinas’s point of view on Kierkegaard.

If it can be shown that cause for the type of concern Levinas raises with respect to Kierkegaardian thought still exists in *Works of Love*, it will also be shown that Levinas’s critique of Kierkegaard retains some merit.

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CHAPTER 1

THE ETHICS OF LEVINAS

In *Totality and Infinity: An Essay On Exteriority*, Emmanuel Levinas is engaged in a phenomenological reduction, starting with our conscious experience and moving “from the experience of totality back to a situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality itself,” the situation of the ethical relation. His descriptive endeavor of ethics as first philosophy is three-fold, including an analysis of the terms involved in the ethical relation, the nature of this relation, and its implications.

When Levinas refers to the totality, he is referring to thought, including philosophy, which correlates with Being, or ontology. Being shows itself to thought in the illumination of disclosure. All thought is of Being, and all experience of Being can be thematized. The essence of Being is the openness or visibility of Being to itself, a manifestation of the ‘same’ to the ‘same’. Ontology consists of grasping what is other “in its generality” by way of a third and neutral term and so rests upon “the essential self-sufficiency of the same.” This third, neutral term deadens the “shock of the encounter of the same with the other,” robbing the other of its alterity.

However, this totality is unable to account for the interiority of an individual that resists complete disclosure or an exteriority that transcends the totality altogether. These represent the terms of the ethical relation, which are not visible to the totality. This does not indicate the terms of the relation are meaningless or that Being is somehow degraded by its

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15 This paper will deal predominately with *Totality and Infinity* as the source of Levinas’s thought since it is the more accessible of his magnum opuses. Further research will be needed in order to analyze the effects of taking *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* into full account, though it and other works will be referenced where appropriate.

16 Levinas, *Totality*, 44.

17 Ibid., 42.
inability to account for them. One of the implications of the ethical relation is an explanation of how the totality or ontology, including language and consciousness, gain meaning.

Levinas attempts to describe in what way ethics is foundational to ontology. The dedication in his second major work, to the victims of the Holocaust and all who suffer at the hand of others, is one indication of his concern regarding what he sees as the failure of traditional, ontologically grounded ethics, reflected in the failure of persons to practice or adopt Kant’s maxims during the second World War. This determination to discover “whether we are not duped by morality” is indicative of a concern over how ethics is possible since any ethical system similarly fails to explain what little kindness there is in the world, “even the simple ‘After you, sir’.” Ethical systems founded on ontology are impotent since ontology constitutes or expresses a war of all against all, each being acting on its egoistic impulses, its conatus essendi, seeking to make what is separate from it a part of itself, to conquer or consume it. “Esse is interesse; essence is interest,” and the interest of essence is witnessed in the struggle between egoisms. Since beings are interested in their own survival, they struggle to maintain and improve their existence, often to the detriment of other beings. This is readily apparent in an individual’s preoccupation with her own psychic or physiological state of being and concurrent lack of significant interest in the similar states of others, or the placement of the importance of her needs and survival over another’s. Levinas poses the question of whether there is something outside of ontology, or the totality,

18 “To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism.” Emmanuel Levinas, epigraph to Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

19 Levinas, Totality, 21; Emmanuel Levinas, Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 117, 185; Emmanuel Levinas, “Substitution,” in Emmanu

20 Levinas, Otherwise, 159; Emmanuel Levinas, “Peace and Proximity,” in Emmanu

21 Levinas, Otherwise, 4.
on which ethics, even in its simplest expressions, can be founded, some inspiration outside of
Being from which it arises. He proposes this foundation is the ethical relation.

Since it is a longing for what lies beyond Being, Levinas labels the ethical relation
“metaphysics” rather than ontology. He distinguishes need from what he calls “metaphysical
Desire,” a desire for what is Transcendent, for an other that cannot be reduced to the same.
Levinas cites Plato’s “Good beyond Being” and Descartes’ “idea of infinity” as moments in
philosophy that admit of such Transcendence. He explains the “other metaphysically
desired is not ‘other’ like the bread I eat” or other like a separate ontological being, since
others of this sort can be “reabsorbed into my own identity” in thought or possession.
Metaphysical desire is directed towards an Other who cannot be absorbed, whose alterity
remains absolute. Need is a longing to affirm the I by reducing what is other to the same,
and the alterity of the world is overcome in this movement but metaphysical Desire is a
longing for what is utterly foreign. Needs lend themselves to my power; I am able to
consume or possess the others I need (e.g., I can consume the food necessary for my
sustenance), but Desire is for what lies outside my power. This Desire is insatiable since
“the Desired does not fulfill it, but deepens it.”

The ethical relation is the relation between two parties, the ‘I’ and the transcendent
‘Other’, which ruptures the immanence of totality. The interiority of the I and the exteriority
of the Other, and the fact that both remain independent of one another notwithstanding their
relation, is essential. Levinas uses the terms ‘language’ and ‘religion’ to refer to the ethical
relation, indicating this relation can be established whilst each of its terms retain their
separation “without constituting a totality.” Each term of this relation has a different sense
in which it absolves itself of the relation and maintains its separation from the totality.

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22 Levinas, Totality, 80, 103; Levinas, Otherwise, 19, 54; Levinas, “Essence and Disinterestedness,” 125;
Robbins, Is It Righteous, 183, 249.

23 Ibid, 33.

24 Ibid. While Levinas himself is not consistent in his use of ‘o’ or ‘O’, throughout this text other with an
‘o’ denotes otherness in general, while Other with an ‘O’ refers to the Other of the ethical relation, or any
Others this relation further obligates one towards.

25 Ibid., 116.

26 Ibid., 34.

27 Ibid., 40.
The separation between the terms is what allows their relation to occur, a going forth from the I to the Other, in a response inspired by the ethical-economical exigency of the Other and its simultaneous placement as higher, or more important, than the I. The asymmetry between the terms of the relation is expressed in two ways, with the I’s being in a position both lower and higher than the Other. The I, as responsible for the Other, is lower than the Other, since the Other is transcendent, presents to the I from a dimension of height, and as more, since the I is able to respond to the Other in her destitution.\textsuperscript{28} For example, if I have a baguette, I am able to give of this bread to the hungry Other. Possession of this bread and the consequent ability to give it to the Other constitute the highness of the I in this relationship. The lowness of the I is reflective of the fact that, from the position of the I, the Other presents itself as more important than the I. For example, in the ethical relation, my possession of the baguette is questioned by the presence of the hungry Other and her need. The I is then lower than the Other because the I is obligated to respond to this need by either giving or withholding sustenance. In either case, the Other is higher than the I because the Other lays claim to a response from the I.

In order for the ethical relation to occur, one of its terms must be a separated I, which can be affected by the movement of transcendence.\textsuperscript{29} The separation of the I, in what Levinas calls its enjoyment, accomplishes a radical breach of the totality and makes a response to the Other possible. The separation of the I is formed as psychism, an inner life.\textsuperscript{30} The I’s way of being in and against the world in enjoyment is a journey through what is apparently other and a returning home to itself via reduction of this other into the sameness of itself.\textsuperscript{31} From the site of the I, everything is at the disposal of the I, prey to its power. The identification of the same is egoism, an autonomous subject who is for-itself.\textsuperscript{32} Enjoyment is the absolute for-

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 215; Richard Kearney, “Ethics of the Infinite Interview [With Emmanuel Levinas, 1981],” in \textit{Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 63-64.

\textsuperscript{29} Levinas, \textit{Totality}, 40.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 54.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 110.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 38.
itself of the subject, which, while not against the Other, is devoid of reference to the Other. It is innocent in its egoism, is “without ears, like a hungry stomach.”

Separation is a happiness achieved by enjoying what one lives *from*. Levinas proposes the I moves within happiness simply by virtue of being alive, *living from* objects not as representations, goals, means, or tools, but from objects *qua* enjoyment. This means the I interacts with the world on a sensible level, enjoying the things it encounters and consumes, without constituting them as things. The existence of the I at this level is one in which it relates to things in enjoyment “without thinking them.” The I is happy for its needs, happy in its dependence on objects of enjoyment, and it is in and through this happiness of enjoyment that the involution and independence, i.e., the separation, of psychism is accomplished. Levinas notes his description of enjoyment “does not render the concrete man,” since human beings already partake in representation and relation with the Other. The objects we enjoy have already been manufactured and we have a conscious relation to them, however, our sensible relation to them dissolves them in enjoyment, suspending their thingness and our relation to them as things.

The very fact one is enjoying life makes one susceptible to the risk of this enjoyment’s cessation. There is insecurity in enjoyment as concern for the future, which opens up the possibility of welcoming the “revelation of transcendence.” This uncertainty leads to dwelling, labor, and possession, all of which allow the welcome of the Other: a giving to and hosting of the Other in the economy of being. Dwelling in a home enables a new relation to the world through labor and possession. Labor is a grasp that takes things as possession to be stored in the home, suspending the uncertainty of the future by safeguarding against the ephemeral and tentative facets of enjoyment. The grasp of the hand “relates to me, to my egoist ends, things,” though it is not yet a conscious relation to these things.

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33 Ibid., 134, 118.
34 Ibid., 113, 146.
35 Ibid., 120, 137.
36 Ibid., 115.
37 Ibid., 139.
38 Ibid., 150.
39 Ibid., 159.
Only once the I has labored to preserve its enjoyment by storing possessions in a dwelling can it be open to “Desire,” to a dimension of the “spiritual,” in the welcoming of the Other. 40

Metaphysical Desire is only possible if the Desired is not anticipated or thought beforehand, since this would imply the desirable was reduced, in thought, to the same. The Other is able to exceed my thought as the idea of infinity, refusing to be reduced to the same, while laying claim to my happiness, to what is ‘mine’ in enjoyment, through its ethical command. At base this command represents the responsibility I have for the Other, a responsibility to insure the Other's welfare even at the sacrifice of my own satisfaction. This is exemplified in Vassily Grossman’s *Love and Fate*, a literary work Levinas finds reminiscent of his own, in which a woman gives her last piece of bread to a captured Nazi soldier who was hitherto her oppressor. 41 A more prosaic example would be the direct effect drinking a cup of coffee has on the lives of others. My quest for a cheap cup of coffee may diminish the life of a farmer who has not received fair wages for her product. The command calls on me to put the Other first, to place the life of the farmer above my need for enjoying inexpensive caffeine.

To approach the Other is to welcome her expression. This welcoming of the other is simultaneously passivity and activity, since it is a teaching the I receives and a giving of the I to the Other. 42 The expression of the Other is welcomed passively insofar as it exceeds the I’s capacity as the idea of infinity and puts the spontaneity and freedom of the I into question. It is an activity insofar as I welcome the Other by responding and my response offers a word or “a product of labor” to the Other. 43

It takes the welcoming of this “expression” to question the autonomy and freedom of the I, to teach that there is a limit to the I’s imperialism. 44 It is in the shame of freedom, when it is called into question by the presence and ethical command of the Other that “freedom

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40 Ibid., 117.
41 Robbins, *Is It Righteous*, 81, 89.
42 Levinas, *Totality*, 89.
43 Ibid., 231.
44 Ibid., 85.
discovers itself murderous in its very exercise.” Since the I reduces all others to the sameness of itself, in enjoyment, the possession of labor, or the content of a thought, the only thing able to call this action into question is an obstacle to my reductive powers. The Other, in her transcendence, serves as such an obstacle, questioning the I, not as a force, but in its resistance to power. Welcoming the Other is a “consciousness of my own injustice,” of the arbitrariness of my freedom. The welcoming of the Other in its questioning of the I is the birth of conscience, which Levinas defines as a “a conceptless experience,” since it does not arise from my freedom, whereas all other experience “is conceptual, that is, becomes my own or arises from my freedom.”

“The idea of Infinity is revealed” to the I through the ‘face’ of the Other. The face is the way in which the Other presents herself by exceeding “the idea of the other in me.” The face is an expression. While the whole body is able to express as the face and the face “remains terrestrial,” it is not equivalent to the physical presence of a face. The face does not manifest itself in terms of qualities—nose, eyes, mouth—it does not present itself as a face-object. Rather, “It expresses itself,” in a conflation of form and content, and transcends any idea or representation I may have of it. “The face speaks,” constantly undoing the form it presents, and signifies “itself.” It appeals to me as an expression in its primordial form, in an immediate presence admitting of no mediating term. The face is a nudity in its self-expression since it “is by itself and not by reference to a system.” It is also naked due to its destitution inasmuch as “to recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger.”

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45 Ibid., 84.
46 Ibid., 86.
48 Ibid., 62.
49 Ibid., 50.
50 Ibid., 203.
51 Ibid., 51, see also 197, 203, 262.
52 Ibid., 66, 140.
53 Ibid., 52.
54 Ibid., 75.
55 Ibid.
The presence of the Other as face is not an image to which I remain neutral “but a solicitation that concerns me by its destitution and its Height.”\textsuperscript{56} The Other imposes herself on the I by way of appeal through her destitution, nudity, hunger—ultimately her mortality—putting the I into question through “the ethical exigency of the face.”\textsuperscript{57} There is urgency because the Other is the “widow, stranger, and orphan,” in need of my assistance and who may perish without it.\textsuperscript{58} “To recognize the Other is to give” in response to this need.\textsuperscript{59}

Since the Other overflows every idea I may have of her, I have no power over her.\textsuperscript{60} The face resists “my ability for power,” changing its character.\textsuperscript{61} Since the face cannot be grasped in enjoyment, labor, or representation, the only way in which I am able to affect the Other is through complete annihilation.\textsuperscript{62} While resistant to my powers, she is still susceptible to the matter of the world I can wield against her; if she cannot be reduced, she can be negated. The resistance of the face is the first expression or word, a command against murder—the ethical edict “you shall not commit murder,” “you shall not jeopardize the life of the other.”\textsuperscript{63} The face introduces the possibility of murder. I am able to kill only the Other, and it is only through murder that I can exert some type of power over her. Yet, paradoxically, the face simultaneously signifies the ethical impossibility of murder. This impossibility “looks at me from the very depths of the eyes I want to extinguish, looks at me as the eye that in the tomb shall look at Cain.”\textsuperscript{64} This means that the ethical responsibility of the I, presented in the face, haunts those who attempt or are tempted to annihilate the Other, giving birth to conscience. It may help to understand this in terms of the I’s exercise of reductionism, which, when encountered with what it cannot reduce, is tempted to do what is most similar to such reduction, annihilation or murder of the Other. However, in this very

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 200. \\
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 207. \\
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 77, 78, 215, 224, 251; Levinas, \textit{Otherwise}, 91. \\
\textsuperscript{59} Levinas, \textit{Totality}, 75. \\
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 87. \\
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 198. \\
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 199; Kearney, “Ethics of the Infinite Interview,” 60. \\
\textsuperscript{64} Levinas, \textit{Totality}, 232.
temptation there lies a recognition of limitation prompted by the overflowing of the idea of infinity within the I, which challenges the I’s habitual consumption and position of primacy altogether.

In the idea of infinity overflowing itself within the subject, the call of the Other from within, the subject is interrupted, its autonomy breached as it is aroused “out of its being” and into a selfhood unique in its responsibility. Levinas uses the term “insomnia” to indicate the disturbance of the same in the call from the Other, a tearing away of the self from its self-identification and self-interest. This responsibility bestows uniqueness upon the subject since to the command of responsibility for the Other only “here I am’ (me [sic] voici) can answer.” While inspired by the appeal of the Other, “the saying that comes to me is my own word” and “commands me from my own mouth.” The Other cannot be a theme for the I’s spontaneous choice concerning the Other: the I is affected by the Other before being conscious of the Other and responsible for the Other before being able to represent the Other to herself. The ethical relation cannot then be described as one originating from the I. It is in this sense that I first become aware of the command of the Other upon me in my own response to the command, and this assignation of responsibility appears to the objective world in the form of my response. Since the I is the one who speaks the command, its obedience must precede any hearing of the command. The response is simultaneous with consciousness of the command, and so responsibility for the Other arises prior to the freedom of will.

Consciousness is a modification of the ethical relation. The ability of the I to represent things to itself, as opposed to merely enjoying or possessing them, necessitates that it is able to separate itself from what it possesses. This knowledge is only gained through the

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67 Levinas, Otherwise, 142.


69 Levinas, Otherwise, 145.
calling into question by the face of the Other, who is able to dispute my possession due to her transcendence, the very fact that the Other comes from a place of height, a plane other than the horizontal field in which the I maintains its identity as autonomous through the reductive exercises of self-identification.

The discourse of the ethical relation not only precedes thought, it founds objectivity. If reason were to precede discourse, true discourse in which the terms remain separated would not be possible, since reason renounces singularity. It is in the offering of the world I possess to the Other that the world becomes common to us and language gains its universal status.\(^{70}\) Language is the foundation for a common possession, a break with the egoist reduction of the other to the same. Things gain meaning in reference to the Other: “in designating a thing I designate it to the Other.”\(^{71}\) Universalization is enacted in the giving or offering of the world to the Other for “it is in generosity that the world possessed by me—the world open to enjoyment—is apperceived from a point of view independent of the egoist position.”\(^{72}\)

Consciousness and reason come to pass through the approach of not only the Other but a third party to whom I must pay heed. There is with the third party a distance initiated between the terms of the ethical relation. Language, the face, is not an “I-thou” relation that would be sufficient unto itself. This would be a loss of meaning, the “cooing” of love, and not the “frankness” expressed in the face.\(^{73}\) Even though it cannot be viewed from a third person perspective, the ethical relation is not cut off from the world. It is through the face of the Other that the third party becomes apparent, “the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity.”\(^{74}\) The I’s relation to the Other relates the I to the third party, and insofar as this is the case, the ethical relation “moves into the form of We, aspires to a State, institutions, laws, which are the source of universality.”\(^{75}\) From the need to compare between the needs and

\(^{70}\) Levinas, Totality, 76.
\(^{71}\) Ibid., 209.
\(^{72}\) Ibid., 75.
\(^{73}\) Ibid., 213.
\(^{74}\) Ibid.
\(^{75}\) Ibid., 300.
rights of the Other and all of the other Others, justice arises. Reason is able to take shape only in the need to weigh and calculate my responsibility for Others.

The initial unlimited responsibility I have for the Other can be forgotten in the birth of justice, and consciousness can turn into a “pure egoism.” However forgetful, I am still unable to escape my responsibility. Once consciousness, and with it the will and freedom of an I, arise, one can choose how to respond to the command, though one is “not free to refuse this responsibility itself; [...] is not free to ignore the meaningful world into which the face of the Other has introduced it.” We cannot altogether ignore consciousness or the human society in which we live, rooted in the obligation of the ethical relation. One can respond to the Other “only in giving or in refusing; I am free to give or to refuse, but my recognition [of the Other’s gaze] passes necessarily through the interposition of things.” It is not compulsory that I give, but it is compulsory that I respond. Even if this response is a refusal, I cannot escape the world in which I live or the language I speak, which are haunted by the trace of my ethical obligation to the Other.

Levinas’s question of ethics has grave ramifications for politics. He maintains that if morality and politics were not in some fundamental sense founded in the ethical relation, there would be no way to “evaluate or discriminate” between forms of society, including fascism and totalitarianism, and it is because “the state may have to be challenged in the name of our ethical responsibility to the other [that] ethical philosophy must remain the first philosophy.”

Levinas has similar concerns over the seemingly biological roots of fraternity since humanity *qua* biology is not a link strong enough to elicit in me a break with my own interests. It does not necessitate that I be the keeper or caretaker of my biological human brother. This is illustrated in the story of Cain, who killed his biological brother Abel. Cain’s “sober coldness” toward his brother understands responsibility only as arising from

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76 Levinas, Otherwise, 128.
78 Ibid., 77.
80 Genesis 4:1-16 (The New Oxford Annotated Bible). References to Cain and Abel are intended metaphorically to elucidate that human beings are not responsible for one another for purely biological reasons.
freedom and so only obliging under contract freely entered. Following the murder, God questions Cain concerning Abel’s whereabouts and Cain replies by asking, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Levinas insists Cain’s answer “is sincere. Ethics is the only thing lacking in his answer; it consists solely of ontology: I am I, and he is he. We are separate ontological beings.” Levinas suggests responsibility arises prior to freedom, outlining a subjectivity that gains its meaning outside of ontology and a humanity in which human beings are sisters, not by virtue of blood, but, through the ethical relation and the responsibility for sociality this implies.

Subjectivity is defined by an ethical relation prior to and fundamental for both enjoyment and representation; it is a relation that is able to transcend and disrupt the happiness of enjoyment, the mastery of representation, and the State and institutions set in place to insure justice. Subjectivity can therefore have a meaning not derived from its struggle for existence; a subjectivity as one-for-the-other, open to the Other “like a reverse conatus.” Where we are inclined to think of the subject as a conatus striving for its continued existence and improvement, Levinas offers an understanding of the subject as striving for the continued existence and improvement of the Other.

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81 Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” 142.
83 Levinas, *Otherwise*, 70.
CHAPTER 2

LEVINAS’S CRITIQUE OF KIERKEGAARD

Levinas’s explicit dealings with Kierkegaardian thought are sparse and brash, restricted to two short pieces compiled within Proper Names,84 two sentences within Totality and Infinity,85 and a few fleeting references elsewhere.86 These explicit mentions mix praise with precaution, verging on condemnation. The points of praise revolve around two related aspects of Kierkegaard’s thought as understood by Levinas: persecuted truth and separated subjectivity. They also provide evidence for Levinas’s own perceptiveness regarding the commonality between their thought. The precaution of Levinas’s evaluation is grounded in what he understands to be the extension, or implications, of these two points of praise within Kierkegaard’s work and appears tantamount to the point at which their thought diverges.

TRUTH PERSECUTED

Levinas finds within Kierkegaard the distinction “between truth triumphant and truth persecuted”87 and locates Kierkegaard’s “properly philosophical work” within the “formal idea of a truth persecuted in the name of a universally evident truth” and able to interrupt or resist the totality of Being as phenomenon.88 Truth triumphant is truth as disclosure, the reign of immanence in which all that is not capable of disclosure is ridiculed as illusion. The manifestation of persecuted truth is essentially different from the manifestation of

85 Levinas, Totality, 40, 305.
87 Levinas, “A Propos,” 77.
phenomenon, and so persecuted truth represents a possibility of encountering a truth outside of the totality, a way out of the imperialist rule of truth as triumphant.

That persecution is essential to this truth constitutes its novel aspect. It shows itself as equivocal, as not there when it is there; it is able to “manifest itself authentically only as persecuted,” that is to say, only in a way not recognized by triumphant truth. The truth of any such transcendence that does not allow itself to be, or simply cannot be, subordinated completely to the system, which remains wholly otherwise, is not recognized by the system. It is an enigma to which the disclosure of ontology cannot make claim, cannot reveal as true in the ontological order, and it is in this way that such truth is persecuted. This new concept of truth is one that, even when revealed, is as if nothing were revealed, a revelation, which in retrospect shows itself as nothing, a trace. Levinas provides the example of the scriptures, whose historical authenticity and truth may be questioned but which retain the “possibility of hearing, through them, a voice from afar,” a truth not accessible through disclosure. This truth is found in the subjective hearing of a message that is not revealed within rational discourse; it cannot be recognized in the ontological order and so must be recognized by a subject separated from this order in its interiority.

In “Enigma and Phenomenon,” Levinas claims that this sort of persecuted truth is not simply a religious consolation, as it seems to be in Kierkegaard, but more importantly “the original form of “transcendence.” Levinas finds in the “Kierkegaardian God” the “way” or form of a transcendent or persecuted truth since this God represents the humility of a truth irreducible to disclosure as phenomenon. It is the possibility of a transcendent truth that Levinas praises in Kierkegaard, though his precaution is offered in the same breath, since he sees Kierkegaard’s use of this truth as overly concerned with the religious, as well as with the self.

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89 Levinas, “A Propos,” 78.
90 Ibid.
91 Ibid, 79.
93 Ibid.
The suffering of persecuted truth is internal to such truth, and Levinas describes Kierkegaardian faith in this truth as “the going forth from self, the only possible going forth for subjectivity, is the solitary tête-à-tête with what for Kierkegaard admits of nothing but the tête-à-tête: God.”\textsuperscript{94} What Levinas finds worthy of critique in the concept of Kierkegaardian persecuted truth is that it opens subjectivity, or founds it, in an isolated relation to God. Levinas seems to accept that the going forth of subjectivity is only possible in a face-to-face relation. What he rejects in Kierkegaard is that the other party of this relation is God, since such an isolated relation with a persecuted God does not and cannot give account of itself. It cannot justify itself or the subject and does not ultimately lend itself to justice. In contrast, the encounter with the face Levinas’s own thought admits of opens the subject to the exteriority of a wholly Other who justifies or invests the subject’s interiority and in turn founds justice and reason. The Levinasian ethical relation is exemplified by language. While each term remains separate and the uniqueness of the I and the Other is respected, the relation between them leads to the objective, to what is shared. Since the ethical relation undergirds the totality, it is also able to interrupt it. The ethical relation itself is also kept in check by the universal, for the ethical relation opens the I to humankind and society. It does not support complicity between the I and the Other but moves into a We, wherein one is responsible for all.

**SEPARATED SUBJECTIVITY**

The persecuted truth of Kierkegaard calls for a separated subject. As Levinas maintains, a separated self, one no longer “agglutinated in being,” and so able to respond to “the enigma” of persecuted truth, is needed.\textsuperscript{95} Belief as a grasping of this enigma translates into the existence of a subject that cannot be limited to exteriority. Belief is not merely an imperfect or uncertain knowledge but a hearing and recognition of the transcendent, of what cannot be recognized by truth triumphant. If belief were only imperfect or uncertain knowledge, the believing subject would be illusory, inevitably diffused in the illumination of triumphant truth. But this separated self is another term that can likewise not be completely

\textsuperscript{94} Levinas, “Kierkegaard,” 70.

\textsuperscript{95} Levinas, “Enigma and Phenomenon,” 71.
integrated into the system; it “is the subjectivity, alone, unique, secret, which Kierkegaard caught sight of.”96

According to Levinas, the whole of European philosophy is indebted to Kierkegaard for “maintaining human subjectivity—and the dimension of interiority it opens—as absolute, separated, standing on the hither side of objective Being.”97 Levinas understands Kierkegaard to be denying the correlation between thinking and Being insofar as he is denying a subjectivity that could be reduced to an expression or process of this correlation. The value of Kierkegaard’s notion of existence and the subject rests in its resistance to such totalizing systems. Levinas gives Kierkegaard credit for perceiving within the discourse of philosophy the possibility of a “political totalitarianism” in which human beings become merely reflections of reason or roles played out in the system, and so perceiving that such a possibility must be protested with the aid of a separated interiority.98

**WHOLLY OTHER**

In “Transcendence and Height,” Levinas implies that another positive aspect of Kierkegaard’s thought is that of a “wholly other,” which relates the notion of separated subjectivity to the notion of persecuted truth since the “wholly other” cannot be revealed in terms of truth triumphant but is revealed to a separated subject.99 The separated subjectivity cannot be a subject of truth triumphant, open only to such truth as available to the “I think,” but must be receptive to a truth persecuted, susceptible to a “wholly other.” In a discussion following Levinas’s presentation of “Transcendence and Height,” Jean Wahl asks whether Kierkegaard’s equating the “wholly other” with God is in error.100 Levinas’s response concedes a relation between the notions but focuses on an affirmation that, unlike Kierkegaard, he is engaged, not in theology, but philosophy. This points out both that

96 Ibid.
97 Levinas, “Kierkegaard,” 66.
98 Ibid., 68.
99 “Subjectivity as res cogitans looks at the Other in terms of being and already invests it, without being able to encounter anything radically different, without finding there the ‘wholly other’ of Kierkegaard and Jankélévitch - even if this investment demands a history.” Levinas, “Transcendence and Height,” 15.
100 Ibid., 29.
Levinas does not deny some relation between the notion of God and the notion of the wholly Other and, more pertinently, that this relation is not one in which the wholly Other is directly comparable to a God such as Kierkegaard’s. It also reinforces the fact that Levinas is not concerned with theology in his philosophical works. What he finds praiseworthy within Kierkegaard, he finds so insofar as it is removed from the theological context in which it is placed or grounded. For example, one of the conditions under which Levinas praises Kierkegaard’s idea of persecuted truth is that it be divorced from the “salvation drama” that Kierkegaard relates it to as “a Christian thinker.” It is a matter to be examined as to whether the points of Levinas’s complaint are solely tied to this theological basis. It is possible they are not entirely so founded and that Levinas finds both his praise and critique in the philosophical thought of Kierkegaard, though it be mired within the religious. It may be that Levinas, even in his critique of Kierkegaard, sees himself not as engaging in a critique of the theological aspect of this thought alone, since he is not doing theology, but as engaged in a critique of Kierkegaard based on his philosophical merit and founded on philosophical concerns. It will be one of the projects of this work to begin disentangling these philosophical concerns from their theological underpinnings.

SUBJECTIVITY AS EGOISM AND VIOLENCE

Even as he lauds Kierkegaard for his perception and protest, Levinas insists that Kierkegaard’s subjectivity, as one that “turns away from thought” and the truth of Being, may be as dangerous as the totality it attempts to protest, leading to “other forms of violence.” Levinas is concerned about the implications of Kierkegaardian subjectivity, which he perceives as “an exhibitionistic, immodest subjectivity.” Levinas suggests that the “exaltation of pure faith,” which is one with the Kierkegaardian version of persecuted truth, is the consequence of “that still natural tension of being on itself” which is egotism, the natural ontology, or conatus essendi, of a subject. Levinas concludes that the entire

102 Levinas, “Kierkegaard,” 68.
103 Levinas, “A Propos,” 76.
104 Levinas, “Kierkegaard,” 70.
argument Kierkegaard mounts against speculative philosophy is based on this subjectivity as “tensed on itself” in care and torment over “its own existence.”

It is important to note that Levinas does not take this separated subjectivity to be on par with his sensible subject or the Kierkegaardian equivalent of the aesthetic subject. According to Levinas, Kierkegaard does not place the subjectivity of the subject in feeling or enjoyment, and so the aesthetic stage of which he speaks cannot make claim to true subjectivity. Indeed, in this stage, subjectivity loses itself in the “impasse of despair” to which the aesthetic emphasis on the sensible leads. Levinas’s complaint is not lodged against the egoism found within the aesthetic life but against the subject who bypasses the ethical, a surpassing that marks the religious as the locus of subjectivity and ultimately constitutes a return to the self as a concern for the self.

Levinas describes Kierkegaardian subjectivity as a secret equal to the subjectivity of the subject. This secret is not knowledge the subject does not express but is itself inexpressible, a condition denoted as sin. Even though for Kierkegaard belief “translates” into the existence of a subject that cannot be limited by exteriority, and so is viewed as a positive contribution of a separated subject, Levinas sees the Kierkegaardian subject as simultaneously “needy and indigent, poor with that radical poverty, that irremediable poverty, that absolute hunger that is, in the final analysis, what sin is.”

This secret in sin that cannot be communicated comprises this “tensing on oneself,” which marks not only the identity of the subject in philosophical terms but also a return to religious experience, namely “the Christian experience, and even to its pagan sources.” This tensing over on oneself is seen by Levinas as an expectation in a “thirst for salvation.”

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106 Levinas, “Kierkegaard,” 67. Westphal notes that Levinas does not think of the Kierkegaardian “self” as simply the aesthetic “I” and is aware that “Kierkegaardian subjectivity is religious and that Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms insist on the priority of the God relation.” Westphal, “The Many Faces of Levinas,” 23.
107 Levinas, “Kierkegaard,” 67.
108 Ibid.
109 Ibid., 69.
110 Ibid., 67.
111 Ibid.
which is a consuming of the self “with desires.” The process through which subjectivity is
determined from the religious experience is the way in which its being manifests itself
beyond a simple tautological identification that would reduce it to a part of being and
disallow the inner drama of the subject. The identification of the subject is comprised of the
subject’s attachment with, or concern over, its own being, and thus constitutes an egotism, a
care of itself for itself.

According to Levinas, Kierkegaard emphasizes the feelings and responses of the
personal interior in opposition to any external evidence and this emphasis comprises the
subjectivity of the subject as a concern for itself. For Kierkegaard, the believing subject seeks
recognition in “forgiveness and salvation” in relation to God, but such recognition is given
by a truth that is itself not able to be recognized. So, this tension never finds rest, never
being recognized by any exterior, the exterior capable of recognizing subjectivity being an
equally unrecognized, persecuted truth of the divine/God. In other words, Levinas accuses
Kierkegaard’s use of the idea of persecuted truth of turning all seeking of truth and “all
relation to exteriority—into an inner drama,” which is viewed by the exterior as scandal and
offence. Thus, Levinas claims that the believing or faithful subject of Kierkegaard relates
to the exterior in anger and through attack. In this way, suffering or persecuted truth within
Kierkegaard does not “open man to other men but to God, in solitude” and represents
violence insofar as it comprises irresponsibility in its isolation.

The issue Levinas has with Kierkegaard’s separated subject then seems to be a matter
of why and to what end the subject is maintained in its separation. Levinas sees the reason
behind the Kierkegaardian separated subject to be dubious, making a return to itself in the
form of a concern for salvation. Levinas, on the other hand, maintains this separation for the
sake of the wholly other, since a separated self is necessary for the ethical relation. This
becomes more apparent in a response given by Levinas to a question from Jean Wahl

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112 Ibid.
113 “The subjectivity of the subject is an identification of the Same in its care for the Same. It is egotism.
Subjectivity is a Me.” Ibid., 68.
114 Ibid., 70.
115 Ibid.
116 Ibid.
concerning the necessity of the state. In his response, Levinas notes that he does not view oppression of the individual by the state “in a Kierkegaardian sense” by which he means that it is not his intention to protest against every concern an individual has with the state since “that would be to return to the egoism against which Reason is right.”117 In contrast to what he sees as Kierkegaard’s egoistic ‘I’ defending itself against the State and system, Levinas proposes “The I that I defend against the hierarchy is the one that is necessary for going right to the Other.”118 The I as separate is necessary on Levinas’s account, as is evident by his exposition in *Totality and Infinity*, but what is essential to Levinas’s thought is that this ‘I’ remain separated for the Other, in order to respond to the Other. He views Kierkegaard’s inwardness in faith, his existing individual, as remaining separated for itself; though this separation be within relation to the Other of God (alone before God), it is not for this Other in the same sense that the Levinasian subject is. For Levinas, a separated subjectivity is indispensable, not to protest against the system in isolation as in Kierkegaard but to perceive the “secret tears” of the Other” and assure “this very nonviolence that the State searches for in equal measure.”119 It does not simply protest for its own sake but is necessary for defining a relation in which it becomes infinitely responsible for, not only the wholly Other it encounters, but for all the other Others.

**SURPASSING THE ETHICAL**

Levinas perceives violence in Kierkegaard’s philosophy at the moment when ethics is transcended for the religious.120 The ethical is the general and exterior for Kierkegaard, as understood by Levinas. The separated subjectivity of Kierkegaard, comprised of a tension on itself, would lose itself in its entrance into the general and exterior, being deprived of this tension.121 Levinas contends that Kierkegaard therefore rejects the ethical stage as the locus of subjectivity since the generalization and “totalizing” of thought within it is still not able to

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117 Levinas, “Transcendence and Height,” 23.
118 Ibid.
119 Ibid.
120 Levinas, “A Propos,” 76; Levinas, “Kierkegaard,” 72.
121 “Subjectivity would lose its tension upon itself, its contraction, its underlying egotism; it would enter exteriority and generality.” Levinas, “Kierkegaard,” 70.
contain the thinker; under the ethical as general, the ‘I’ as unique would be lost since the
general is not able to “contain nor express the secret of the I.” Levinas proposes that ethics
is not simply the general but that it is a responsibility for the Other, and it is precisely ethics
that singularizes the I.

Levinas finds fault with transcending the ethical and particularly with the fact that it
is transcended for the religious, since it is the domain of belief no longer justified by the
external world. According to Levinas, even internally this stage of existence is
simultaneously a “communication and solitude” and so “violence and passion.” Levinas
says this is the beginning of a contempt in Kierkegaard and one expressed throughout the
philosophical tradition of the “ethical basis of being” so important to his own project. Levinas
Kierkegaard’s thought, according to Levinas, places ethics in a secondary position. In this
sense, Levinas sees in Kierkegaard another way in which the tradition allows for or supports
a degeneration of ethics. It is not only the Hegelian system that is to be countered but also
what Levinas sees in Kierkegaard as a primary (and over-) emphasis on the self as a subject
of protest in reaction to this system.

In an interview, Levinas expands upon the issue of surpassing the ethical. He notes
that the “purely ethical” has always been doubted by both philosophy as ontology and
religion, particularly Christianity. One can presume philosophy, as a champion of truth
triumphant, simply does not take the purely ethical or the religious, as carriers of persecuted
truth, to have any merit. In the case of religion, the ethical is viewed as “an approximation,
only a beginning” to which the religious is superior. Levinas contends that the “ethical is
the spiritual itself, and there is nothing that overcomes the ethical. To overcome the ethical is
the beginning of all violence.” He references the Holocaust, noting the importance of
acknowledging that anything surpassing the ethical allows for such violence. He claims
shortly thereafter that “the only thing that still remains is the goodness of one human being to

122 Ibid., 72; Levinas, “A Propos,” 76.
123 Levinas, “Kierkegaard,” 72.
124 Ibid.
126 Ibid.
another,” leading one to conclude that he sees the purely ethical as the relation of goodness between human beings. This sentiment is found in *Totality and Infinity* as well where Levinas states, “The I is conserved then in goodness, without its resistance to the system manifesting itself as the egoist cry of subjectivity, still concerned for happiness or salvation, as in Kierkegaard. To posit being as Desire is to decline at the same time the ontology of isolated subjectivity and the ontology of impersonal reason realizing itself in history.”

Levinas is proposing that subjectivity irreducible to objective being can be understood in a way completely separated from egoism in all its forms, even that which he perceives in Kierkegaard, and he attempts to posit an option other than “speculative totalitarianism and Kierkegaardian non-philosophy.” Levinas claims, “a renunciation of the self should [...] accompany that desire for salvation” within Kierkegaard, indicating that he finds no evidence of self-renunciation as related to Kierkegaardian religious desire and possibly implying that if such renunciation were evident, Kierkegaard would not be culpable of endorsing egoism.

Levinas explains that exteriority, the totality, is resisted, not by an interiority, an ‘I’ maintaining its secret, but “because the exteriority in which human beings show us their faces shatters the totality.” It is in this light that he claims, “It is not I who resist the system, as Kierkegaard thought; it is the other.” The Other is irreducible to the same. In its transcendence, the Other interrupts the reductive activity of same, putting the ‘I’ into question and signifying the responsibility of the I for the Other. It is the responsibility for the Other that, according to Levinas, rids the I of the negative aspects he finds within the Kierkegaardian subject; it “rides the I of its imperialism and egoism (be it the egoism of salvation)” and does so without reducing it to a moment within the system as in Hegel. The I’s complete responsibility for the Other does not leave any return unto the self and comprises a “totally new tension toward the other” in contrast to what he perceives as a

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127 Levinas, *Totality*, 305.
129 Ibid., 71.
130 Ibid., 73.
132 Levinas, “Kierkegaard,” 73.
Kierkegaardian tension on oneself. The I is, for Levinas, a support for the Other, a support that equates to putting the Other above the I. The responsibility I have for the Other cannot simply be a feeling for, or an unconditional obedience to, the Other, since I am responsible for and not only to the one who commands me. In this way, Levinas rejects what he sees as the relational options available to Kierkegaardian subjectivity, a relation to other human beings, which is at best pity for the Other, and a relation to God of complete obedience. In both cases, there is a threat of violence and egoism, a distancing from my urgent responsibility to and for the Other: in the first, there is no obligation or responsibility that binds me directly to the human Other, and in the latter there is an unconditional obedience to a God who may command me to violence and for whom I may forsake the human Other.

This threat is particularly apparent within *Fear and Trembling*, where Levinas understands Kierkegaard’s affinity for the Akedah, Abraham’s binding of Isaac, as indicative of the negative implications of his philosophical thought. Levinas points to Kierkegaard’s use of Abraham as an example of subjectivity rising to the religious level, through an encounter with God, and transcending the ethical. Such transcendence of the ethical allows for the possibility of Abraham’s sacrificing his son, Isaac, in unconditional obedience to God and in an overlooking of his responsibility to and for his son. However, Levinas maintains that the story can have a different interpretation in which the highlight is Abraham’s being able to be brought back to the ethical order. Levinas claims that the essential part of the story is that Abraham “had sufficient distance with respect to that obedience to hear the second voice.” In this sense, Levinas places the importance of the story in Abraham’s being able to maintain a distance from his faith and belief in his relation with God and so able to hear the ethical command upon him in an encounter with the face of the human Other. Levinas also claims

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133 Levinas, “A Propos,” 77.

134 “The one to whom I am answerable is the same one for whom I am answerable.” Levinas, “Kierkegaard,” 74. “The one for whom I am responsible is also the one to whom I have to respond. The ‘for whom...’ and the ‘to whom...’ coincide. It is this double movement of responsibility which designates the dimension of height. It forbids me from exercising this responsibility as pity, for I must render an account to the very one for whom I am accountable, or as unconditional obedience in a hierarchical order, for I am responsible to the very one who orders me.” Levinas, “Transcendence,” 19.

135 “Abraham’s attentiveness to the voice that led him back to the ethical order, in forbidding him to perform a human sacrifice, is the high point in the drama.” Levinas, “A Propos,” 77.

136 Ibid.
Kierkegaard’s interpretation fails to mention Abraham’s intercession on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah, another important incident in which Abraham explicitly works on behalf of other people, indicating his responsible subjectivity.\(^{137}\)

Levinas’s concerns appear to be grounded in Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous works, particularly *Fear and Trembling*, so it is important to examine in more detail what aspects of *Fear and Trembling* are troublesome on a Levinasian account. Levinas himself notes his concerns over Kierkegaard’s thought are not due to the way in which he structures his work, maintaining the violence he finds there “is not just a question of literary form” and so not reliant on the pseudonymity of the work or any implication thereof.\(^{138}\) Essentially, Levinas understands his critique as applicable to Kierkegaardian thought in general. If his assessment is accurate, one should still be able to find in authored works, such as *Works of Love*, residual causes for concern not based in the structure of the text and so not able to be circumvented by questions of literary form and authorship.

\(^{137}\) Ibid.

\(^{138}\) Levinas, “Kierkegaard,” 72.
CHAPTER 3
KIERKEGAARD’S FEAR AND TREMBLING

*Fear and Trembling: Dialectical Lyric* is attributed to the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio. The central topic of the text is the Akedah, or binding of Isaac by Abraham, as relayed in Genesis 22. In the narrative, God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac. God has previously promised Abraham that his descendants shall be as numerous as the stars, and Isaac, Abraham’s only son who was miraculously conceived in his very old age, represents the fulfillment of this promise. Abraham responds to this command by traveling toward Mt. Moriah and binding Isaac in preparation for the sacrifice. As he raises a knife to slay him, he is interrupted by a voice from heaven commanding him to stay the knife. The story is often taken to be an example of Abraham’s great faith in God and his promises.

Silentio does not claim to have understood Abraham or to have faith, and so his discussion of faith is not equivalent to its possession. Kierkegaard implies that objective understanding of doubt and faith ignores the essential aspect of both: the existing individual who doubts or has faith must go through these movements for herself. This process cannot be accounted for on a conceptual system just as the work is not to be systematically handled by a “gobbler of paragraphs” but worked through in fear and trembling. Silentio explains we often recite clichés, simplifying the Akedah, instead of wrestling with and attempting to understand it. He complains of the tendency to want to go beyond doubt and faith, when each is “a task for a whole lifetime.”

Silentio associates faith with Abraham’s paradoxical traits of being powerless in his strength, foolish in his wisdom, mad in his hope, and loving to the point of self-hatred, and claims that Abraham’s faith is evidenced in several important anecdotes prior to the Akedah:

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140 Ibid., 8.

141 Ibid., 7.
his leaving the home of his fathers for the Promised Land, an “unreasonable” move wherein he leaves “behind his worldly understanding;”\textsuperscript{142} his intercession on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah;\textsuperscript{143} and his belief in God’s promise that the earth will be populated with his offspring, even when he and his wife Sarah have grown old enough as to deem this belief absurd.

Following these instances, Abraham’s faith is tested by God’s sacrificial command to slay his son. If Abraham had given up the hope of receiving the fulfillment of God’s promise upon resigning to the sacrificial command, then he would not be the father of faith, for, though it is great to resign oneself, it is still greater to cling in faith to that which one has resigned.

Silentio introduces the distinction between the Knight of Resignation and the Knight of Faith. Knights of Infinite Resignation find a measure of peace in sacrificing all to God. Though such peace may be found in this life, it is not \textit{for} this life and is based on a hope in some future condition. One finds contentment within a current situation or the present life by believing God will eventually make amends. Even though this situation or life will never improve, one can reconcile oneself to the situation. For example, one could say, “I must give up the possibility of being a professional dancer since my legs have been amputated.” One resigns to the impossibility and retains hope in God.

A Knight of Faith, however, while acknowledging that a state of affairs is impossible, still clings to it as a possibility. For example, a Knight of Faith would be resigned to the fact that the loss of her legs makes dancing professionally impossible but still have faith for this life that somehow such dancing is possible. The Knight of Faith has joy in regaining what was resigned, but Knights of Resignation “keep Isaac only with pain,” meaning the Knight of Resignation who is not expecting to regain the use of her legs will find it difficult and painful to accept the fact that she is able to dance professionally after all, since she had given up this hope entirely.\textsuperscript{144}

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 21. It is particularly interesting that Silentio includes this as evidence of Abraham’s faith since Levinas explicitly points to the fact that Kierkegaard (and so Silentio) does not mention this intercession.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 35.
Abraham would not be of import as a Knight of Resignation since the movement of resignation is a philosophical one and does not require faith. Faith requires infinite resignation, since through this movement an eternal consciousness is gained, “love for God,” which is prerequisite for the absurd movement of faith.\(^\text{145}\) Despite the fact that faith necessitates resignation, in faith nothing is ultimately renounced since, having resigned finitude, the Knight of Faith gets it back again “by virtue of the absurd.”\(^\text{146}\) In infinite resignation, one resigns the temporal in order to cling to the eternal, but in faith one again holds fast to the temporal after having given it up.\(^\text{147}\) The Knight of Faith “is convinced that God is concerned about the smallest things” and therefore that God cares about the details of her life.\(^\text{148}\) She “belongs entirely to the world,” fully enjoying the tasks and pleasures of everyday, expressing the “sublime in the pedestrian.”\(^\text{149}\) It is no real faith if the hope is only for a future life, since this would be akin to resignation, lacking faith’s essential absurd movement. Faith is for the current life one lives.\(^\text{150}\)

Abraham has the “highest and holiest” ethical obligation to Isaac.\(^\text{151}\) There is a contradiction between this obligation and Abraham’s willingness to carry out the sacrificial command. While anyone can be a murderer, Silentio proposes Abraham is not a murderer but a great man of faith since the paradox “makes it difficult for him” to kill his son.\(^\text{152}\) Silentio explains, “The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he meant to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he meant to sacrifice Isaac,” and in this juxtaposition the anxiety of faith is born.\(^\text{153}\) Silentio identifies three questions we face when considering the anxiety of Abraham’s faith: Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical; Is there an absolute duty to

\(^{145}\) Ibid., 46, 48.
\(^{146}\) Ibid., 36.
\(^{147}\) Ibid., 18, 38.
\(^{148}\) Ibid., 34.
\(^{149}\) Ibid., 39, 41.
\(^{150}\) Ibid., 36.
\(^{151}\) Ibid., 28.
\(^{152}\) Ibid., 30.
\(^{153}\) Ibid.
God; and, Was it ethically defensible for Abraham to conceal his undertaking from Sarah, from Eliezer, and from Isaac?\footnote{Ibid., 54, 68, 82.}

**PROBLEMA I: IS THERE A TELEOLOGICAL SUSPENSION OF THE ETHICAL?**

The ethical is identified with the universal in which every individual has her purpose and which is expressly collapsed into “social morality” or Hegel’s “ethical life” \footnote{It is noted in a footnote, “this term indicates socio-cultural norms.” Ibid., 346.} The ethical task of an individual is to annul her individuality in order “to become the universal.”\footnote{Ibid., 54.} An individual sins if she places herself above the universal and remains in sin so long as she asserts her primacy; sin is only obviated through repentance – once more putting the ethical before her singularity. A spiritual trial occurs when, having entered the universal, the individual finds herself tempted to place herself before the universal, to sin against the ethical. Silentio defines faith as the “paradox” that, having already abdicated within the ethical, “the single individual is higher than the universal,” superior to and “justified before it.”\footnote{Ibid., 55-56, 62.} Faith is a paradox in which “the single individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute” and is a position, having transgressed the universal, which cannot be mediated and which, the paradox being “impervious to thought,” cannot be understood.\footnote{Ibid., 55-56.} Faith is demonstrated in the Akedah since there is a teleological suspension of the ethical, which defines it, in the form of Abraham’s putting himself and his absolute relation to the absolute before his ethical duty and relation to Isaac. Since Abraham is in the paradox, being an individual higher than the universal, he cannot be mediated, i.e., he is unable to utilize the universal to explain his position since he has bypassed the universal.

Silentio sets up his discussion of Abraham and faith in opposition to Hegelian philosophy. In Hegel’s philosophy, interiority is inferior to exteriority. The universal external is the goal toward which history (spirit) moves, and the subjective interior is an obstacle to be
overcome, synthesized into the universal. Silentio explains that if ethics is the highest, if Hegel is right and the universal is mankind’s telos, then nothing other than Greek philosophy, and what follows from it, is needed to express the interior of an individual.\textsuperscript{159} It would therefore be impossible to suspend the ethical, as there would be no higher telos for which to suspend it. However, Silentio maintains that the ethical as universal is not the highest, pointing to Abraham’s faith as a counterexample. If the ethical were the highest, then given Silentio’s definition of faith, Abraham would be a murderer. So, either Silentio’s definition of faith as paradox, and as exhibited in Abraham’s story, is accurate and possible or Abraham is a murderer.

Abraham’s ethical relation to Isaac is that of a father who has an obligation toward his son. Within the ethical, there are various gradations of obligation, and at times some higher form of ethical obligation may necessitate a father sacrifice his child, suspending the paternal ethical obligation. Examples of teleological suspension of one ethical duty in light of another include the obligations of a king to his people when the gods demand the sacrifice in exchange for a peaceful kingdom (e.g., Agamemnon), or a father who must execute his son for his offense against the law, placing his ethical duty to the law before his duty to his son. Both of these individuals would remain in the ethical, resigning one ethical expression to a higher ethical expression. They would be tragic heroes, a subtype of Knights of Resignation, understood by their offspring, by the people, and joined by them in agony and admiration. Though many fathers lose their sons, and some must even sacrifice theirs to a higher ethics, none are the son of promise that Isaac was and none are faced with the responsibility for the life of their son in the way Abraham was: “Isaac’s fate was placed, along with the knife, in Abraham’s hand.”\textsuperscript{160} This indicates not merely that Isaac was to die at Abraham’s hand but that Abraham, unlike the tragic hero who has an intelligible reason to engage in child sacrifice, chooses to sacrifice his son for a purpose exceeding ethical obligations and understanding altogether. According to Silentio, Abraham, as a man of faith, “transgresses” the ethical, suspending it for a higher telos outside of it. The ethical within the story of

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 55, 104.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid., 21-22.
Abraham is found “cryptically in Isaac, hidden, so to speak, in Isaac’s loins, and must cry out with Isaac’s mouth: Do not do this you are destroying everything.”161

Since Abraham is not sacrificing Isaac on account of a higher ethical obligation, Silentio enquires as to Abraham’s motivations and concludes he does it “For God’s sake and—the two are wholly identical—for his own sake.”162 It is for God’s sake since God demands proof of Abraham’s faith, and it is for Abraham’s sake since he wants to prove his faith. Faith is expressed in these two ways “on the one side, it has the expression for the highest egotism (to do the terrible act, do it for one’s own sake), on the other side, the expression for the most absolute devotion, to do it for God’s sake.”163

**PROBLEMA II: IS THERE AN ABSOLUTE DUTY TO GOD?**

From the perspective of Hegel’s philosophy, and all similarly totalizing approaches to existence, the ethical, universal, and divine are synonymous, so that every ethical duty is also a duty to the divine. Since such duty involves no direct relation to God, Silentio claims it is also the case that every such duty is not a duty to God. He gives the example of the duty an individual has to love his neighbor, which would originate in (i.e., is traced back to) God, but in which I do not directly enter into relation with God but only with my neighbor. He explains, “If in this connection I then say that it is my duty to love God, I am actually pronouncing only a tautology, inasmuch as ‘God’ in a totally abstract sense is here understood as the divine—that is, the universal, that is, the duty.”164 Loving God in a different sense, by relating to God directly, is considered impossible on this account. The distinguishing factor between Abraham and a Knight of Resignation, or tragic hero, is Abraham’s private relation to the divine. The Knight of Resignation takes the ethical to be the divine—has a universal relation to “god” not a personal one.165 This is the highest a pagan,
one who has not reached the religious stage of existence and whose sacrifices and other behaviors remain within reason, can achieve. Silentio points to Socrates as an exemplar of the pagan as a Knight of Resignation. However, he contends that Abraham is greater than Socrates for in the Knight of Faith’s absolute relation to the absolute, she is uniquely able to address God as “You,” whereas the Knight of Infinite Resignation is only able to address God “in the third person.”

The paradox of faith as an absolute duty to God is expressed in terms of the individual determining “his relation to the universal by his relation to the absolute, not his relation to the absolute by his relation to the universal.” Abraham’s ethical duty as a father is to love his son, Isaac, but this ethical relation and obligation become relative in contradistinction to his absolute relation and duty to God. This absolute duty to God is a paradox that cannot be mediated and, in being relativized, the ethical gains a “paradoxical expression.” If one fulfills one’s absolute duty, one cannot be understood since one’s actions and sentiments are contradictory, i.e., Abraham is preparing to slay Isaac and Abraham loves Isaac.

Silentio offers the following verse as an example of the absolute duty to God a single individual has: “If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” The verse is a paradox—it demands an absolute duty to hate one’s family and yet “can never lead the knight of faith to stop loving.” This is the case with Abraham’s story since the “ethical expression” for his sacrifice of Isaac is that he hates him, but if he actually hated Isaac, there would be no difference between Abraham and Cain. In order for what Abraham does to express the paradox, to be faith, he must first love, and never cease to

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166 Ibid., 77.
167 Ibid., 70.
168 Ibid.
170 Kierkegaard, “Fear and Trembling,” 74.
171 Ibid.
love, Isaac. God “demands absolute love,” but if one believes that this entails indifference to those one already loves, one is “not merely an egoist but also stupid.”

**PROBLEMA III: WAS IT ETHICALLY DEFENSIBLE FOR ABRAHAM TO CONCEAL HIS UNDERTAKING?**

From the standpoint of the ethical universal, the individual needs to rid herself of her interiority by transfiguring it into an exterior expression; a person’s ethical duty is to “work himself out of his hiddenness and to become disclosed in the universal.”

To leave this inwardness hidden is to sin. Faith is precisely the paradox that there exists interiority that cannot be translated into the exterior, “that interiority is higher than exteriority.”

Silentio identifies two types of interiority, one in the aesthetic stage and the other in the religious stage. The interiority of faith in the religious stage, Silentio is careful to note, is not the same as the aesthetic interiority that can be translated into exteriority. The first, aesthetic interiority, is reducible to immediacy (feelings, moods, etc., all hedonistic tendencies identifiable with the aesthetic stage of existence), but the interiority of faith is only possible after resignation, in surpassing the ethical to which the first interiority has already been resigned. Philosophy does not give faith its due, equating it with the first interiority, and so with mere opinion or feeling. Faith represents this second kind of inwardness that cannot be mistaken for the immediate, aesthetic variety, which is due to a “free act,” and of which the ethical universal is right to demand disclosure.

One either remains silent and hidden, “interior,” because one refuses to be disclosed to the universal, and so truly sins, or, like Abraham, one cannot be mediated since one is above the universal. There is either no hiddenness of an individual as higher than the universal and Abraham’s concealing of his task is not able to be defended or a hiddenness

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172 “It is indeed this love for Isaac that makes his act a sacrifice by its paradoxical contrast to his love for God.” Ibid.

173 Ibid., 73.

174 Ibid., 82.

175 Ibid., 69.

176 Ibid., 85.
that is above the disclosure of the ethical does exist and Abraham’s silence is justified, though he cannot be mediated.
CHAPTER 4

LEVINASIAN CRITIQUE OF FEAR AND TREMBLING

The following section will provide an overview of plausible Levinasian interpretations of the Akedah and discuss the dissatisfactory elements of Silentio’s interpretation, with a particular interest in any support for Levinas’s accusations of egoism and violence.

Levinas interprets the Akedah as a parable indicating that regardless of my ontological or biological relation to humanity or my religious relation to God, and prior to both, I have a responsibility to and for the Other. The Akedah narrative is used by Levinas to illustrate the moment in which an individual comes to recognize that she is responsible for the human Other and that this obligation is more fundamental and important than obedience to God: God and God’s commands are not above the ethical command of the orphan, widow, and stranger. In this case, Abraham responds to the face of Isaac by refraining from the God-commanded sacrifice.

Jeffrey Stolle proposes the Akedah is composed of a series of interruptions of Abraham and that in each case Abraham responds to the immediacy of the interlocutor by whom he is interrupted. Emphasizing the speech within the narrative puts appropriate emphasis on the messenger who calls on Abraham to spare Isaac, and Stolle suggests this messenger is Isaac *qua* Other.177 He explains that God’s messenger calls Abraham’s name twice and conjectures this repetition indicates Abraham’s lack of recognition of the voice, which “was not God’s voice, and it was not Yitzhak’s; he recognized each of these voices

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after only one call (22:1, 22:7)." Stolle suggests this call of the messenger is a hybrid of the two voices recognized earlier, of God’s and Isaac’s, in the command of the face.

Alternatively, the Akedah could be interpreted as illustrative of the Levinasian call to justice. Supposing God could serve in the role of Other, Isaac would then represent the third/Other qua humanity. If Abraham were to obey the command of being responsible to or for only one Other, answering the command of the initial Other to the exclusion of all Others, he would in some real sense be sacrificing those Others, i.e., Isaac and his descendants, to the initial Other in which he is in relation, i.e., God. That a voice from heaven stops the sacrifice at the last moment can be seen as an illustration of the call of the third to responsibility for all, even as one responds to the Other in which one is in immediate relation. A distance with respect to obedience is needed when answering the call of the Other so that I do not respond with unconditional obedience to one only but am able to respond to the Others also calling to me through the face. Unconditional obedience to the initial command from God/Other is a sacrifice of justice, and in this sense a suspension of the ethical as universal.

Westphal says a Levinasian interpretation of the Akedah fails to address adequately two key aspects of the narrative: the fact that God does command Abraham to kill Isaac and the fact that Abraham appears to be blessed by virtue of his willingness to kill Isaac, especially since he is not chastised for this willingness. A Levinasian interpretation does not seem to be hindered by the fact that God has made the sacrificial command, since this only serves to illustrate more forcefully how the face of the Other obligates me to the extreme extent that I become responsible for my God, God-relation, and all that may develop from this. Furthermore, in the case where God is understood to be the Levinasian Other in the narrative, one can interpret the command of the Other as one that puts all others in jeopardy. If God is Other, then the command to sacrifice Isaac comes with the initial ethical command to be for the Other. When responding to the ethical command, I impede my ability to answer to the command for anyone else, that is

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178 Stolle, “Levinas and the Akedah,” 140.
180 Jeffrey Dudiak makes a similar but more poetic statement about the responsibility one has for the God they serve. Dudiak, “The Greatest Commandment?” 117.
unless the third is also able to call on me through the Other for justice. In other words, if the relation of the I to the Other is too exclusive and does not open into a responsibility for humanity at large, then it represents a violence akin to the sacrificing of these others at the bequest of the initial ‘ethical’ command and with them a sacrificing of justice.

The second issue Westphal raises is of more concern, and Stolle has also made note of the difficulty involved in interpreting the blessing of Abraham by God. However, Stolle notes it is a matter of emphasis. God blesses Abraham as a consequence of harkening to the voice, but this is not necessarily the first voice Abraham hears. The blessing could be equally seen as arising from Abraham’s distance with respect to obedience to the first command, his responding to the voice of the heavenly messenger, the face of Isaac qua Other. \(^{181}\)

Furthermore, another look at the narrative can reveal a sense in which the ethics of the father for the son are overcome in the ethical relation of Abraham to Isaac qua Other. Abraham would then be blessed because, as the narrative claims, he has not withheld his son but not in the sense that he was actually willing to sacrifice Isaac by plunging a knife into his heart. Rather, Abraham is blessed because he does not withhold Isaac from gaining a new significance, or signifying in a new way. Abraham can be understood as considering Isaac to be his greatest possession or extension of self. That he did not withhold Isaac could then indicate that he did not withhold this understanding of Isaac as his son, possession, or promise for the future, from taking on the significance of the face. Though the narrative expresses this in an extreme fashion, this basic situation frequently occurs. I interact with other human beings as if they were extensions of myself, objects that could be reduced to the sameness of myself. My partner, child, or friend is a means to an end, bringing me fulfillment and a return to myself. That every relation, even those which I have a vested interest in, is open to the command of the face means that even those I hold most dear or most capable of identifying myself in terms of, I am responsible for as Other. This obligation is prior to my favored relation with them, and I can sacrifice the egoistic/ontological conception I have of them when called upon by the face to respond to them as Other. I cannot fully suppress this responsibility for them as Other, which can shine through, at the very time in which I am tempted to make of them a means to my end, to reduce them to the sameness of myself. In

\(^{181}\) Stolle, “Levinas and the Akedah,” 141.
other words, Abraham ceases to think of Isaac as his son, the token of fulfilled and future promises of God, or the sacrifice God has provided and demanded and relates to Isaac as the Other.

The motivation behind Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac alludes to the egoism Levinas finds within *Fear and Trembling*. Both of the reasons cited as the impetus for Abraham’s sacrificing Isaac amount to egoism: doing it for God’s sake and doing it for his own sake in order to prove himself to God.\(^{182}\) His motivation to do it on God’s behalf may indicate he is not wholly isolated and egoistic, but Levinas would claim that such an isolated relation with God, and one in which motives become confounded—doing it for God’s sake becomes indistinguishable from doing it for his own—is still imbued with egoism. The inward spiritual movement of faith, which marks an absolute relation to the absolute in *Fear and Trembling* is seen by Levinas as a movement that, while initially towards God, ultimately makes the movement back to the self. For Levinas, identity of self is tantamount to a reduction of the other to the same; “The tautology of ipseity is an egoism.”\(^{183}\) In other words, return to self, or expectation thereof, no matter how seemingly selfless, remains within the movement of egology, of the I in its reduction of the other to the same. Abraham makes an egoistic move in his movement toward God and obedience to God’s command. He prepares to follow through with the sacrifice to prove himself to God, therefore enacting a return to self. If, however, he acts in view of the complete faith he has in God and God’s promises, namely the promise that Abraham’s descendants will be numerous, then his movement, although one of self-renunciation insofar as he sacrifices with Isaac the relation he has with his son, is ultimately a return to the self since it is based on the promise that Abraham will receive once more what he gives up. In short, the entire concept of faith as proposed by Silentio is objectionable to Levinas since in all of its absurdity, it does not represent the absurd going-forth-from-self-without-return of the Levinasian ethical subject. Levinas is pointing out what is lacking in the type of giving being portrayed by Silentio. Abraham’s sacrifice as understood by Silentio is an investment in expectation of a return. The ego

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\(^{182}\) Kierkegaard, “Fear and Trembling,” 71.

remains intact though it has shifted from the first to the second interiority of which Silentio speaks, from simple animalistic desire to a leap of faith in the hope of salvation or the fulfillment of a promise. Levinas is disturbed, not by the first interiority, the aesthete who—steeped in enjoyment—would be in ignorance or innocence on his account, but by the religious individual who proceeds past the ethical to a second interiority, returning to a state of egoism and so, in Silentio’s words, sinning against the ethical. “Need opens upon a world that is for-me; it returns to the self. Even when sublime, as the need for salvation, it is still nostalgia, homesickness,” and Levinas finds what he would identify as need at the base of Abraham’s desire to please God, to prove his faith, and in his expectancy of receiving back what he is prepared to sacrifice.\footnote{Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” 350.}

In the second problema, Silentio inserts a third neutral term between the I and human Other. That Abraham relates to the absolute absolutely in faith means he can only relate to Isaac relatively. God becomes a bridge between Abraham and all else, most disconcertingly between Abraham and the human Other. While Abraham has an immediate relation with God, this is at the price of having an immediate relation with any Other. The human Other will always be neutralized by God. The self-reductive movement of egoism becomes apparent in any relation that disallows the possibility of encountering the face of the human Other.

While it is widely accepted Silentio identifies ethics with the universal, i.e. either Hegelian \textit{Sittlichkeit} or Kantian \textit{Moralität}, the idea that this is the only ethics Kierkegaard himself perceives is deemed naïve at best.\footnote{Westphal, \textit{Levinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue}, 22, 53; Westphal, “The Many Faces of Levinas,” 21-22; Peter Kemp, “Another Language for the Other: From Kierkegaard to Levinas,” \textit{Philosophy and Social Criticism} 23, no. 6 (1997): 20.} Many claim Levinas exhibits such naïveté in his critique, reducing Kierkegaard’s understanding of the ethical to Silentio’s portrayal of it within \textit{Fear and Trembling} or other pseudonymous texts. While Levinas explicitly acknowledges Silentio is discussing ethics as universal and not the ethics he himself puts forth, he equates a suspension of the ethical universal with a suspension of ethics as his first philosophy.
This equivocation can be explained as a failure on Levinas’s part fully to consider Kierkegaard’s corpus and his negligence in separating pseudonymous statements from Kierkegaard’s own position. I contend, however, that Levinas’s critique ultimately wages a battle against what he finds to be a suspension of the ethical relation itself, reflected in the way in which Silentio’s Abraham surpasses the ethical universal, and evidenced in his willingness to kill Isaac. It is not the religiousness of Kierkegaardian thought in which Levinas locates the fundamental difference between them but the structure of relations this religiousness implies.186 Just as he dislikes a God who demands unconditional obedience, so too would he resist any candidate for the Other who, in an isolated relation, placed this relation and all following from it, above the life of another human being and beyond critique. Brian Prosser states, in light of Levinas’s analysis of Fear and Trembling, “the Kierkegaardian analysis tends to permit a kind of collusion between God and man that Kierkegaard has made a point to deny the relationship between people.”187 The fact that Kierkegaard permits this kind of relation with God is the origin of Levinas’s precaution. Levinas can admit of collusive relations between people, typified by the “cooing” of love.188 However, he will deny that such a relation is the kind that leads to ethics or on which an ethics can be founded. Rather, such collusive relations indicate a return to egoism and lend themselves to violence by being cut off from responsibility for others outside of the relation. According to Levinas, such love relations, which do occur—people have friends, partners, children, etc.—are actually founded, as with all forms of human relation, on the ethical relation, and so, unlike the God-relation, are subject to the demands of justice and the critique of the face.

The first alternative rests on the question of whether Levinas is merely a bad reader of Kierkegaard. In some respects, he is. For example, as Simmons notes, Silentio mentions Abraham’s intercession on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah in Fear and Trembling, despite

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186 Prosser makes a similar claim when he asserts, “Levinas is not only concerned with denying the “interlocutor” (i.e. God) in Kierkegaard’s description of the “transcendent” awareness that grounds conscience. Levinas also questions the nature of interlocution implied by Kierkegaard.” Prosser, “Conscientious Subjectivity,” 397.

187 Ibid., 408.

188 Levinas, Totality, 213.
Levinas’s claim to the contrary.\textsuperscript{189} Just as he fails to notice Silentio’s mention of Abraham’s intercession, it is claimed Levinas fails to notice the equivocation of ‘ethical’ within his critique. Merold Westphal contends this failure is the primary indicator of Levinas’s poor Kierkegaardian scholarship.\textsuperscript{190} Failure to notice this equivocation means that, while he acknowledges the main ethical as universal under discussion is \textit{Sittlichkeit}, he attributes this to be the highest sense of the ethical Kierkegaard perceives. Merold Westphal claims Levinas’s complaint concerning the violence of surpassing the ethical is not justifiable due to this equivocation, a confusion of Kierkegaard’s ethical stage with his ethical \textit{in toto}.\textsuperscript{191} The claim is that Kierkegaard presents a different sort of ethics, similar to Levinas’s, in his authored works or, even more subtly, within \textit{Fear and Trembling},\textsuperscript{192} and that Levinas is not careful to distinguish between Kierkegaard’s understanding of the ethical and the ethical as portrayed by the pseudonym Silentio. If Levinas were to have acknowledged this other ethics, he would have no cause to critique Kierkegaard, finding this ethics to be nearly identical to his own. Since the ethics being suspended is \textit{Sittlichkeit} and not Kierkegaard’s own ethics, then interpretations of \textit{Fear and Trembling}, which reduce it to an elucidation of religions primacy over the ethical, are in error.\textsuperscript{193} Levinas’s accusation that Kierkegaard’s thought is violent in its surpassing of the universal ethical for the religious is problematic, since Kierkegaard’s religious is often understood to be closely related to his genuine conception of ethics. If this is the case, then Kierkegaard, while surpassing one type of ethics, does so for the sake of an “ethical relation”— while Abraham suspends his ethical duties to Isaac in a customary or legal sense, he is engaged in an “ethical relation” with God and so

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\item \textsuperscript{189} Kierkegaard, “Fear and Trembling,” 21; Simmons, “Existential Appropriations,” 51.
\item \textsuperscript{190} Westphal, “The Many Faces of Levinas,” 21.
\item \textsuperscript{191} Ibid., 32.
\item \textsuperscript{192} Simmons claims this other ethics is perceptible as a subtext throughout \textit{Fear and Trembling} and Lee promotes a reading of \textit{Fear and Trembling} in which God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac with the intention of having him reach a new understanding of ethics similar to Levinas’s. Aaron Simmons, “What About Isaac?: Rereading \textit{Fear and Trembling} and Rethinking Kierkegaardian Ethics,” \textit{Journal of Religious Ethics} 35, no. 2 (2007): 321; Jung H. Lee, “Abraham in a Different Voice: Rereading \textit{Fear and Trembling} with Care,” \textit{Religious Studies} 36, no. 4 (2000): 379.
\item \textsuperscript{193} Peter Kemp notes Levinas’s concerns over Kierkegaardian thought are negligible due to this equivocation of “ethics.” Aaron Simmons identifies the idea “that Kierkegaard only has one static conception of ethics that is decidedly trumped by religion” as being “the most problematic point in the Levinasian interpretation.” Kemp, “Another Language,” 43; Simmons, “What About Isaac?” 326.
\end{itemize}
ultimately does not advocate a surpassing of Levinasian ethics but an ethical relation of the Levinasian type. If Abraham’s God-relation is actually an instance of a Levinasian ethical-relation, then the issue of egoism is mollified as well since God functions as the transcendent Other that interrupts the egoism of a separated subjectivity and Abraham is for-the-Other of God in the same way that the I is for the Other.

Levinas will not consider a God-relation on par with the ethical relation\(^\text{194}\) and will maintain religion in any form, including that of a Kierkegaardian God-relation, misunderstands the ethical, placing it in a remedial or secondary role. That both equate the ethical with the spiritual would seem to provide leverage for the position that Kierkegaard’s true ethics is very close to Levinas’s.\(^\text{195}\) In spite of this, Levinas will maintain the distinction perceptible between the ethical and the spiritual in \textit{Fear and Trembling} is not merely due to equivocation, which would only indicate that social or principled ethics were overcome in the name of a spiritual relation with God. A distinction remains when the equivocation is set aside and only Abraham’s relation to God is considered, i.e., the God-relation as the ethical relation. In this case, Levinas still has cause to claim that the ethical, in his sense, has been overcome, for in the inward spiritual relation Abraham has with God and the injunction he receives to kill Isaac, he finds a surpassing of Abraham’s ethical relation with Isaac, which nearly leads to violence. This echoes the concern voiced earlier regarding a collusive relation with God, an exclusiveness that disqualifies the God-relation from representing the Levinasian ethical relation. This is primarily found in Abraham’s inability to speak and the incapacity of Abraham’s relation and actions to be called into question.

Levinas has provided a critique that serves to describe, albeit not precisely, the way in which he sees Kierkegaard’s ethics, as presented by Silentio, to be at odds with his own—not only because they make laws or cultural customs relative with respect to a relation with a transcendent Other, for this occurs on his own account, but because the relation between Abraham and Isaac, and with it Isaac’s life, is suspended in favor of and remains secondary to an individual’s absolute relation to God. What Levinas’s own brief interpretation of the


\(^{195}\) Rötzer, “Emmanuel Levinas,” 58; Levinas, \textit{Totality}, 117.
Akedah should have made clear is that his concern over Silentio’s version is not directed only at a suspension of *Sittlichkeit* but also at what he sees as the suspension of the ethical on his own terms. Levinas holds that ethics is mankind’s *telos* but does not restrict the term to the ethical universal. Levinas will emphasize Abraham’s ethical relation to Isaac as the Other for whom he is primordially responsible as opposed to Abraham’s ethical relation to Isaac as a father for a son and maintain that Abraham can only suspend the ethical obligations he has as a father toward the more foundational ethics of the ethical relation. Within the narrative as interpreted by Levinas, not only shall the father love the son, but more importantly, and as a “higher,” foundational ethics, the I shall not kill the Other—this is not simply a moral maxim or cultural custom but an expression of the primordial obligation I have toward the Other. Abraham, before he is even conscious of God or God’s promises, is obligated toward the human Others around him.

Though he uses the term ‘ethics’ equivocally in his critique, Levinas does not do so in utter naïveté since he is expressing dissatisfaction for the surpassing of ethics in both senses of the word. Abraham prepares to surpass *Sittlichkeit* as well as *the face of the Other*, i.e., the fundamental ethical command not to kill. Levinas may well perceive the other sort of ethics Kierkegaard puts forth but finds it dissatisfactory since it trumps what is most fundamental to his own ethics, the human Other.

Though concerned that his own sense of ethics has been surpassed Levinas also takes issue with Kierkegaard’s suspension of ethics *qua Sittlichkeit*, whether or not the ethical relation is explicitly suspended along with them. As Dudiak has argued, one of the reasons Levinas interprets the importance of the Akedah, in opposition to Kierkegaard, as found in the call back to the ethical, is that a private and inward relation to God, which demands the obedient one to an extremity such as murder bypasses and fails to lead to justice, while Levinasian ethics supports even as it suspends “universal ethics, as law,” seeking a better justice on behalf of the Other. I agree with Dudiak and find the kingpin of Levinas’s

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196 Westphal notes this concern in passing, acknowledging that Levinas’s worry over Kierkegaard’s interpretation of the Akedah regards religion trumping the ethical in every sense, including the ethics as first philosophy he puts forth. However, he upholds *Works of Love* as capable of dispelling this concern. Westphal, “The Many Faces of Levinas,” 32.

concerns to be the failure of Kierkegaard’s religious relation to lead to justice. Levinas would take issue, as Silentio does in the third problema, with the universal’s description of ethical duty as transfiguring one’s interior into an exterior expression and thus becoming disclosed to the universal, since this process degrades the separation of the subject. There is, however, a significant sense in which Levinas understands one’s ethical duty to consist in being subject to the universal since the ethical relation leads to the universal/objectivity even as it preserves the separation of the subject. That the call of God or the Other can be weighed against the demands of justice, and not only that the ethical as universal can be suspended by the ethical relation, is essential to Levinasian ethics. Levinas describes the ontology, reason, and politics to which the ethical relation leads, and similarly all which surpasses the ethical, as violent. Abraham’s God-relation is representative of violence for the religious is another branch growing from and surpassing the ethical relation. However, unlike politics, reason, and ontology, which can be called into question by the face of the Other, Silentio’s Abraham presents the spiritual, in his absolute relation with God, as beyond question. It is this surpassing that troubles Levinas, since it places the spiritual above all reproach. While the totality harbors violence, Levinas sees in Fear and Trembling “other forms of violence” unlike that characteristic of everything else surpassing the ethical. What makes this violence unique is that it is not subject to critique. Alternately, Levinas’s ethical-spiritual is questioned by the presence of the third, by the call for justice, even as the ethical relation calls all that surpasses it into question. One relates to relative forms of justice relatively, i.e., obligations to laws and institutions, and to the absolutely Other as absolute. While the preceding sentence can apply to both thinkers and their ethics, there is a difference at the structural level since for Levinas my absolute relation to the Other always already involves the third, leading to the establishment and betterment of the relative. In other words, the “relative” is able to call into question my “absolute” relation. This means that there is a need not only for the ethical to interrupt and question the totality but for the totality/universal to temper ethics. It is equally important that I respond to the needs of the Other and the demands of justice. For example, I need to respond to the Other directly by giving or refusing to give of myself and my resources. At the same time, the Other opens me to humanity, so

[198] Levinas, “Kierkegaard,” 68.
my response cannot only be to this Other but must take all Others into consideration. This leads to the setting up of institutions such as government aid programs. However, this movement into the universal instantiates a violence by not encountering the Other as Other, not seeing, and so not seeing to, the unique need of the individual Other. For this reason, it is important that I am able to encounter and respond to the unique individual, to perceive the “secret tears” of the Other, that the face is also able to interrupt institutions. Silentio seems to be supporting the position that the absolute can suspend the relative, but that the relative cannot suspend or question an individual’s absolute relation to the absolute.

In the Akedah, Levinas sees a metaphor for the forgetfulness a subject may have of his or her foundational obligation. This forgetfulness is found clinging to ontology, albeit in the form of religiousness. Silentio is right to suggest the story points to the possibility of suspending the ethical as universal, but he is wrong to stop with that. Levinas wants to go further and say that the religious itself must be questioned and suspended. The ethical relation, in this case Abraham’s relation to Isaac qua Other, must be able to interrupt the ethical as universal as well as the religious. It is for this reason he emphasizes the distance Abraham keeps from his obedience to a command, even though this command is revealed in a relation with a transcendent God. One might claim that Abraham’s relationship with God is not reducible to the ‘religious’ as traditionally understood, for the brunt of Kierkegaard’s writing is aimed at motivating the reader to engage in personal relation with God rather than the pursuit of rational religion. However, when one takes the religious stage of existence in the spiritual and individualistic sense Kierkegaard intends, the relation between the religious individual and God only becomes more difficult to question.

The ethical relation obligates an individual to be-for-the-Other against the Other’s death regardless of social customs or revelations from God—ultimately calling social customs and Godly commands into question. Here “religion” in a Levinasian sense does not trump the ethical because all “religion” is derivative of the ethical relation. Kierkegaard places the

199 Levinas, “Transcendence,” 23.
200 Westphal proposes Levinas is engaged in promoting the ethical as “the teleological suspension of the religious.” He claims, despite the apparent divergence of this expression from Silentio’s due to the reversal of the terms ‘religious’ and ‘ethical’, that they only appear at odds since Levinas uses the term ‘ethical’ equivocally. Westphal, Levinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue, 53.
religious before the ethical in any sense, which ultimately means that on his account God has priority over human Others. Whether it is solely *Sittlichkeit*, or whether Kierkegaard does promote an ethics similar to Levinas’s in authored works, or even within *Fear and Trembling* as some suggest, Kierkegaard places God before the human Other, allowing for an exclusive and mediating God-relation and the violence and egoism this entails.

Another way to understand the fault Levinas finds with *Fear and Trembling* is in terms of divine command theory. The most common reading of the text finds universal ethics suspended for an ethical-spiritual delineated by divine command theory, which amounts to ‘whatever God commands is ethical-spiritual in the deepest or most foundational sense,’ or ‘what God commands is the Good.’ Levinas will not concede such an interpretation is possible since the narrative as represented by Silentio finds God to command what is most distant from the foundational ethical-spiritual in a Levinasian sense. He will deem the principle ‘x is Good because God commands x’ unacceptable. God may command Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, but this does not make the sacrifice of Isaac good or an expression of the Good. Levinas does not deny that God and the Good are related in some manner, but it is not clear that he understands God as synonymous with the Good, whereas he seems to think that these terms are synonymous on Kierkegaard’s understanding. Levinas will insist that “God comes to mind” only when goodness passes between two human beings in the ethical relation. The responsibility of the I in Levinas is tied up with the command that arises in the face of the Other – this command is a call to responsibility for the Other, an individual’s susceptibility to the power of powerlessness, not a command from the all-powerful.

Simmons says a redefining of divine command theory is needed, one that does not see divine command as the call to a specific act “but as a structural call to responsibility as constitutive of subjectivity,” much in the same way as the command to responsibility in the face of the Other constitutes the Levinasian ethical subject.\(^{201}\) The second, or religious, interiority in which Abraham is immediately connected to God and cut off from communicating with others, is ethical, according to Simmons, because Abraham’s suspension of the ethical in light of his relation with God/the religious is a standing “before

\(^{201}\) Simmons, “What About Isaac?” 327.
God as before the absolute Good.”202 Simmons wants to argue that such goodness is viewed as an existential possibility, an option I can take up, when in fact it is part of an individual’s identity. Essentially, Simmons insists that God must be taken as Abraham’s Other to which he has an obligation, one that defines Abraham’s own subjectivity. If this is the case, then the Good is found in Abraham’s relation to God and God is the condition for the Good just as any Other with whom I have a relationship of responsibility, and not in the sense that God defines the Good, i.e., determines that $x$ is good.

If God is not able to fulfill this role of the Levinasian Other, then Simmons’ revision of divine command theory will not work and the issue of divine command, that God can command a religious individual to do anything, remains a matter of concern. If, however, God is able to serve in this role, the relation gives the impression of remaining vulnerable to Levinas’s concerns over exclusivity and mediation. In either case, there appears to be grounds for apprehension regarding egoism and violence in Kierkegaard’s thought. It must be decided whether some residue of this remains within Kierkegaardian ethics as portrayed in an authored work. One of the most pertinent issues to explore will be whether God can serve in the role of the Other, allowing a religious individual’s religious relation to God to be comparable to a Levinasian ethical relation.

202 Ibid., 335.
CHAPTER 5

KIERKEGAARD’S WORKS OF LOVE

PSEUDONYMITY: WHY TURN TO WORKS OF LOVE

In “A First and Last Explanation,” Kierkegaard confesses authorship of his pseudonymous texts and claims responsibility for his pseudonyms in “a legal and literary sense,” while maintaining a distance from what they express. Kierkegaard has created the pseudonymous authors, but what is written is from their perspective and remains their own work. In this way, he is remote from the works and claims, “in the pseudonymous books there is not a single word by me. I have no opinion about them except as a third party, no knowledge of their meaning except as a reader.” Kierkegaard requests that the separation between him and his pseudonyms be respected and that any pseudonymous work be cited, not under his own name, but that of the respective pseudonym. In contrast, he claims full authorship of his signed works in every sense.

Due to the request of Kierkegaard, and the echoed emphasis within the secondary literature that one cannot conflate what is said within the pseudonymous work with Kierkegaard’s own position, it is necessary to turn to the authored works in order to determine whether there is a foundation for the concerns Levinas expresses regarding Kierkegaardian thought. Of the authored works, the most pertinent text for such an undertaking is Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses. This is due to the fact that it deals most closely with the underlying theme of Levinas’s own project,

204 Ibid., 626.
205 Ibid., 627.
outlining a Kierkegaardian ethics in the form of commanded love of one’s neighbor, and, it is
the text most referenced as being able to allay Levinas’s concerns and undermine his critique
of Kierkegaard.

**LOVE AS COMMAND: AN ETHICAL DUTY**

In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard introduces an ethics opposed to the ethical universal in
*Fear and Trembling*, one that is in fact founded on the religious surpassing of the ethical
universal that so concerns Levinas. This religious ethics is grounded on an individual’s
absolute relation to the absolute in the form of a command from God to love the neighbor.
*Works of Love* consists of Kierkegaard’s reflection on the different aspects of the biblical
command to love your neighbor as yourself, which each individual must hear for herself as if
it were only addressed to her and in which Christian love is exemplified.\(^{207}\) The obligation to
love one’s neighbor stipulated by the command is considered an “ethical task, which is the
origin of all tasks.”\(^{208}\)

Kierkegaard claims the command, and so the concept of love as a duty, did not
originate in any human heart but came about through Christianity, “previously in Judaism,”
and has “its base […] in the eternal,” being commanded by God.\(^{209}\) The ethical obligation
one has to love one’s neighbor did not originate within the human. Paganism had no concept
of the neighbor or of love as an obligation: before the advent of the biblical command, all
love not expressly selfish was lauded as “genuine.”\(^ {210}\) With the command in place, all love
not fulfilling its requirements is considered selfish and disingenuous.

In making love of the neighbor requisite, the law demands “the inwardness of self-
renunciation” as well as perseverance in this self-renunciation.\(^ {211}\) Merely human conceptions
of love are limited, but the demand of true love is infinite.\(^ {212}\) No one can fulfill the infinite

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\(^{208}\) Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 64.

\(^{209}\) Ibid., 40, 55.

\(^{210}\) Ibid., 66.

\(^{211}\) Ibid., 133.

\(^{212}\) Ibid., 188.
requirement of the law, though Kierkegaard proposes Jesus Christ has and that God lovingly takes over the demand by loving the person called to duty.\(^{213}\) By virtue of love’s fulfillment of the law, every person commanded becomes guilty and, in relation to God and the command, is in infinite debt.\(^{214}\) The law is both set and met by divine authority, and, while the eternal gives the command, it also takes on the responsibility of ensuring that the law be fulfilled; as noted, it is already fulfilled in the person of Jesus, and the task of loving the neighbor in self-renunciation can be accomplished by an individual in some respect, though it remains never-ending.\(^{215}\)

**Celebrated and Commanded Love**

Christianity is true love and all else one might label love is actually selfishness.\(^{216}\) Often love and self-love are confused, so Kierkegaard introduces a distinction between commanded love and celebrated love. Celebrated love is best identified with erotic love, friendship, and familial relations, “is secretly self-love,” and therefore inferior to commanded love.\(^{217}\) Celebrated “love and friendship contain no ethical task,” harbor no obligation.\(^{218}\) The only task of such love is to express gratitude for the beloved, but there is never any obligation for expressing gratitude or finding a beloved. As noted, commanded love is an ethical task since the command obligates an individual to love the neighbor. Commanded love “requires one to love God above all and then to love one’s neighbor,” to love God and then your neighbor as yourself.\(^{219}\)

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\(^{213}\) Ibid., 107.

\(^{214}\) The law under discussion is “God’s law” and the love is “Christian love.” Ibid., 112; “To talk about love being the fulfilling of the law is once again an impossibility without simultaneously recognising one’s own guilt and making every man guilty.” Ibid., 110.

\(^{215}\) Ibid., 104; “When the eternal says, ‘You shall love,’ it becomes the external’s responsibility to make sure that it can be done,” Ibid., 55.

\(^{216}\) Ibid., 25.

\(^{217}\) Ibid., 36, 65.

\(^{218}\) Ibid., 64.

\(^{219}\) Ibid., 70.
Christianity and the command presuppose every human being loves herself and aim to “wrest self-love away from us human beings.”\textsuperscript{220} With the command to love, love, as a duty, becomes a matter of conscience and not of impulse, inclination, feeling, or calculation.\textsuperscript{221} The command to love the neighbor “wrenches open the lock of self-love.”\textsuperscript{222}

Christianity does not seek to “discriminate” against or eradicate other forms of love but demands of all love that it be transformed into a matter of conscience, that even the relation between lovers also be a relation between neighbors, built upon and making reference to a relation with God.\textsuperscript{223} For Kierkegaard, Christianity’s victory over the world consists in the fact that it “has made every human relation between man and man a relationship of conscience” and so transfigures “your every relationship to other human beings into a God-relationship.”\textsuperscript{224} Kierkegaard explains that one should maintain preferential relationships but that these should be vehicles for supporting and instructing one another in neighbor-love and God-relation. Neighbor love should “be the sanctifier in your covenant with God” even within your erotic relations.\textsuperscript{225}

All celebrated love is based on preference, and the object of such love is loved in distinction from, and more than, others. Commanded love prompts one to love all those one would not naturally be inclined to love since one garners no advantage in return for this love, to love all human beings without exception: it is the difficult love of the ugly.\textsuperscript{226} “Celebrated” love is that love which is celebrated by poets and pagans and involves the choice of the beloved, and in this arbitrary, partial selection, the lover asserts her selfishness. This preferential love revolves around the preferred beloved who is “the other-self or other-I”\textsuperscript{227} and reflects back on the self. For example, one gains admiration for oneself as one admires one’s beloved \textit{qua} other-I and receives back at least a portion of the love one has

\textsuperscript{220} Ibid., 34, 24.
\textsuperscript{221} Ibid., 143.
\textsuperscript{222} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{223} Ibid., 140.
\textsuperscript{224} Ibid., 345, 137.
\textsuperscript{225} Ibid., 74.
\textsuperscript{226} Ibid., 36, 342.
\textsuperscript{227} Ibid., 66, 69.
given. In the devotion of celebrated love, the lover “relates himself to himself in self-love.” The two parties of a celebrated love relation “come together to become one I” to the point where the unified I “selfishly cuts itself off from all others.”

Neighbor-love is “determined by love,” or God, and the command and never by a preferred object of love. The command bypasses choice of the beloved, dictating one is to love the neighbor. Ultimately all humankind and love itself (God) becomes the object of love. Neighbor love is not self-reflective since it is unselfish. In commanded love, my neighbor and I are not able to unite as in celebrated love since we are related as two individuals “eternally qualified [only] as spirit,” as unique yet equal individuals related to God.

The major discord between the Godly and worldly understanding of love is selfishness. Worldly wisdom prizes selfishness or self-interest above all else, even within love relations, so that worldly love is but selfishness in another form. This is as far as the world is able to go in understanding or defining love “because it has neither God nor one’s neighbour as a middle term.” Kierkegaard claims love qualifies as conscientiousness only “when either God or the neighbour is the middle term.” This seems to imply that the neighbor and God may be interchangeable on Kierkegaard’s account. However, his positioning of the neighbor as the middle term is in the context of God’s using this middle term to judge whether a love-relation is conscientious and so does not indicate that the neighbor serves as mediator between God and myself. For example, in the love relation between two friends, the neighbor or neighbor-love must be the middle term. This means that one must love one’s friend first as a neighbor if the relation is to exemplify commanded love.

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228 Ibid., 68.
229 Ibid. There is a striking similarity between Kierkegaard’s description of celebrated love and Levinas’s description of eros in *Totality and Infinity*. This type of love is grounded in need and makes the movement of self-identification.
230 Ibid., 77.
231 Ibid., 68, 351-352.
232 Ibid., 68-69.
233 Ibid., 123.
234 Ibid.
235 Ibid., 143.
This love and relation are reliant on the God-relation, so the initial structure of God as mediator remains intact.

**GOD AS THE MIDDLE TERM**

Kierkegaard begins *Works of Love* by claiming love cannot be properly discussed, understood, or practiced if God is forgotten, since God is love and the source of all love. While Kierkegaard’s concern is with “the works of love, and therefore not with God’s love but with human love,” the necessity of God for genuine human love is emphasized. Even what is considered proper love, or the qualification for a real work of love, is delineated in terms of what is pleasing to God. The “infinite difference” between the worldly understanding of love and Christianity’s understanding amounts to the difference in how each defines love. The main distinctions between worldly and Christian understandings of love are the distinction of selfishness versus self-renunciation and the distinction between love involving two human beings in the worldly conception and the additional criterion of God as a middle term between human beings in the Christian conception. Proper love between two human beings is a triadic relation involving the two parties plus “love itself,” or God who is equal to love. Kierkegaard further explicates that true love always references God: true love of self is true love of God, true love of other persons is to assist them in love of God, and being loved is to be assisted to love God.

Whereas preference is the middle term in celebrated love, God is always “the middle term” in the relation of neighbor love and ultimately the central figure in all love. The

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236 Ibid., 20.
237 Ibid., 280. Works here represents deeds or acts of love, though this is understood in the loose sense of the term, with acts including interior mercy and simple thought of or prayer on behalf of the neighbor.
239 Ibid., 112.
240 “Worldly wisdom thinks that love is a relationship between man and man. Christianity teaches that love is a relationship between: man - God - man, that is, that God is the middle term.” In any case, where God is not the middle term, Kierkegaard claims it “has not been love but a mutual and enchanting illusion of love.” Ibid., 112-113.
241 Ibid., 280, 124.
242 Ibid., 113.
243 Ibid., 70, 78, 87, 74.
mark of true or genuine love “towards men” is the “God-relationship” to the point where God “not only becomes the third party in every relationship of love but essentially becomes the only loved object.”

For love to be anything other than the self-love celebrated by pagans and poets, God must be the middle term. Kierkegaard views the criterion of God as the middle term as necessary for ensuring that love is not arbitrary or selfish. From the worldly viewpoint, “love” has no constant definition, the lover “arbitrarily determines” what love means and the beloved “judges” whether this determination is sufficient—the human terms of the relation become the highest judgment of it. However, in order to judge correctly, the beloved would need to have the correct understanding of love and correct self-love, both of which can only be had in relation to God. Every individual must relate herself first “to God and the God-demand” and only then can an individual properly relate herself in love to another. As Kierkegaard explains:

> When there is no third in the relationship between man and man, every such relationship becomes unsound, either too ardent or embittered. The third, which thinkers would call the idea is the true, the good, or more accurately, the God-relationship.

The duty to love is what gives birth to the concept of neighbor, and it is only by love of the neighbor that equality is instituted and the selfishness of celebrated love “rooted out.”

Love is essentially sacrifice, and sacrifice is only possible in the relation between God and human; it is not possible in merely interhuman relations. In interhuman relations, one seeks to be loved, and if one directs one’s love to another human being directly, it is reducible to self-love. According to the Christian conception, to love God is synonymous with loving human beings and vice-versa. One must be in a relation with God in order to

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244 Ibid., 124.
245 Ibid., 117.
246 Ibid.
247 Ibid., 313.
248 Ibid., 58.
249 Ibid., 247.
250 Ibid., 351-352.
learn what love is and to love oneself properly, for only God can “teach every individual how he should love.”  

God cannot “accept a man’s love directly,” so an individual must give what she wishes to give to God to those she sees, “with the thought of God.”  

Commanded love is reducible to love for God, which can only gain full expression as directed toward fellow human beings. The active occupation of the task of love is in the world, but the judgment of these things lies with God. Kierkegaard says of merely human love that, no matter how enthusiastic it is, “being merely human it is not in the deepest sense powerful in itself, because it has no higher power over it.”  

The God-relation and God as the middle term denotes that human love relations are transcended and kept in check by a power greater than the terms of the relation or the relation itself.

**The Neighbor as the Self**

The neighbor dwells nearer than any other and is the first person one meets after having been alone before God. Ultimately, the qualification of neighbor is that of human being: friends and enemies alike belong to this category, and one has a duty toward all since “Christian love teaches love of all men, unconditionally all.” What matters when identifying my neighbors is my own duty toward them. My neighbor is simply the one “towards whom I have a duty,” and I am a neighbor when I fulfill this duty.

According to Kierkegaard, the neighbor is “a duplicating of one’s own self” and “what philosophers would call the other” by which the quality of love can be assessed to determine whether it is actually self-love. The neighbor is also “the third-man of equality” or “the first Thou.” The dual nature of the command, that one love the neighbor and do so

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251 Ibid., 118.
252 Ibid., 158-159.
253 Ibid., 184.
254 Ibid., 37, 64.
255 Ibid., 79, 63.
256 Ibid., 38.
257 Ibid., 37.
258 Ibid., 66, 69. Martin Buber’s *I and Thou* is considered by the translators to be a “fruitful development”
as one loves oneself, ensures all self-love is circumscribed within and transformed into neighbor love and, so, into “proper self-love.” 259 Love of the neighbor and proper love of self are synonymous due to the dualistic aspect of the “you shall” within the command; correct self-love and neighbor love are “fundamentally […] one and the same thing.” 260

**Renunciation and Compensation**

Celebrated, or worldly, love requires sacrifice: a measure of self-love must be reapportioned in order to maintain love relations, and the God-relation must be sacrificed in order to ensure unity between the terms of these relations. While worldly love calls for sacrifice, it still demands to be understood, loved, and admired. 261 It is the seeking of, or awareness that one is likely to receive, a reward for one’s renunciation (i.e., be loved in return) that leads Kierkegaard to claim that such renunciation remains within worldly relations and calculations, “within the human,” deficient in reaching beyond itself “towards God.” 262

The Godly understanding of love “sacrifices everything in order to make room for God” even if no one else understands this sacrifice. 263 Such sacrifice gains an individual no merit or admiration from the world or from God, who sees such a sacrifice as nothing. Love is a sacrificing of all for no reward. Godly sacrifice is a true sacrifice since it is “unconditionally […] without reward.” 264 The demand of the law for the inwardness of self-renunciation is explained by Kierkegaard as requiring that there be no reward for one’s fulfilling of the law, and that one help the beloved to love God even if this leads to a sacrifice of the love-relation itself. 265 For example, Kierkegaard once called off an engagement to his

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259 Ibid., 35.
260 Ibid., 40, 39.
261 “Men will sacrifice this or that and everything, but they still hope to be understood and thereby to remain in a meaningful human context in which one’s sacrifices are recognized and rejoiced over.” Ibid., 133.
262 Ibid., 189.
263 Ibid., 123.
264 Ibid.
265 “The inwardness of love must be sacrificial and therefore must not require any reward” and
betrothed, believing she would be helped in her love of God if he removed himself from the equation.

LOVE AS HATE: THE ESSENTIAL OFFENCE OF COMMANDED LOVE

Kierkegaard emphasizes the offence to reason involved in commanded neighbor love and self-renunciation as Christianly understood and executed. The offence of the command stems from the fact that the neighbor is an equal by virtue of common humanity and that one who renounces oneself in obedience to the command places God and the neighbor first, both of which offend the worldly understanding of love and how one should act in regards to oneself and one’s loved ones. In a collision between “the divine and merely human conception” of love, the world can mistake Christian love for hate since the true Christian lives according to a criterion no one else can see. The world does not suspect the Christian lives by the criterion of the God-relation. Without acknowledgement of this other criterion, an individual living a God-loving life is not understood by the world and is viewed as self-loving.

“inwardness is essentially a God-relationship; it has no reward, not even that of being loved. In this way it belongs wholly to God, or the person belongs wholly to God.” Ibid., 133.

266 Ibid., 188. It is important for Kierkegaard to focus on the offensiveness of Christianity since he is waging a battle against Christendom, which leaves this offence out. Ibid., 194.

267 Ibid., 72.

268 Ibid., 115.

269 Ibid., 127. That Godly-love is perceived as selfish is also noted on Kierkegaard, Works of Love, 130-131.
CHAPTER 6

LEVINASIAN CRITIQUE OF WORKS OF LOVE

HOW WORKS OF LOVE ALLAYS LEVINAS’S CONCERNS

*Works of Love* appears to mitigate, if not completely answer, Levinas’s concerns over Kierkegaardian thought. The renunciation of the self that is so prominent in commanded love contest the claim of egoism, while the loving aspect of the command opposes the “violence” of the God-relation, since it is through this relation one is called to love human others.

Levinas’s concerns of an egoist subject, who has only to do with God and is concerned only with her own salvation, appear to be assuaged by *Works of Love*, which outlines how self-renunciation and selflessness are essential to the religious. Kierkegaard identifies neighbor-love as the highest form of love and claims it turns the understanding of the egoistic self upside-down. As Westphal points out, in *Works of Love* the subject is not only concerned by God but, because God commands love of the neighbor, the subject is also concerned by the neighbor whom she is commanded to love. Furthermore, Kierkegaard himself highlights how egoism is the enemy of neighbor-love and maintains that any love seeking repayment is selfish. For this reason he cites the work of remembering the dead as “a work of the freest love” since it is guaranteed against being self-love and a by-product of coercion or compulsion.

The violence Levinas finds in Kierkegaardian thought is difficult to discern within this text as well. As Kierkegaard often states, God is love, and God commands the individual to love. If God is love, it is difficult to maintain that a relation with a loving God will lead to

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270 Ibid., 141.

271 Westphal, *Levinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue*, 70, 85. There are others who hold similar views, but I refer mainly to Westphal in this section, as a proponent of this position and others, because he is the most prominent scholar on the relation between Kierkegaard and Levinas.

272 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 322, 325. There are some interesting parallels between this and Levinas’s notion of ingratitude which would be further explored, space permitting.
violence, like that nearly witnessed in the Akedah, especially when this relation is claimed to lead to love of all.

Not only do Levinas’s concerns over egoism and violence in Kierkegaard seem unfounded when *Works of Love* is considered but, as Westphal claims, the ethics in this text appears similar to Levinas’s, as it is composed of a relation with a unique and transcendent Other who calls on one to be responsible for others.273 Jeffrey Dudiak and John Lleweyln also note the similarity, describing the ethics portrayed in *Works of Love* as one of *agape*, with neighbor love being a simple extension of the love an individual has for God.274 *Agape* is “love that does not respond to the value of its object” and which is not “reason-dependent.”275 This term has taken on religious significance within the Christian tradition and is used to indicate love of the type God has, or is, and the presence of this love between God and persons. Levinas also seems to be putting forth an ethics of *agape*, insofar as he insists that responsibility for the Other is not based upon value (e.g., I am not responsible for the Other because we are related by blood) or dependent on reason, though one stripped of the religious connotations of the term.

Accounts of the similarity between the two thinkers, and therefore, claims that *Works of Love* is a solution to Levinas’s complaints, are largely based upon a transmutation of the significant terms of their work. There are three primary terms used by Levinas that can be shown to nearly equal the terms central to *Works of Love*. These Levinasian terms are “responsibility,” the “Other,” and the ethical command “thou shalt not kill.”

The term “responsibility” in Levinas is comparable to Kierkegaard’s commanded love. Levinas prefers the term “responsibility” to “love” since he finds “love” to be a loaded and overused term, which often fails to convey the obligatory aspect the term “responsibility” connotes.276 However, he finds responsibility to be basic and akin to love.277 He likens

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responsibility to “the love without concupiscence of which Pascal spoke,” and classifies it as a stern term for neighbor-love. The similarity is strengthened by Levinas’s distinction between responsibility and love in the colloquial sense, which is analogous to the one Kierkegaard draws between “celebrated” (preferential) and “commanded” (non-preferential) love. The correlation between the term “neighbor” and the Levinasian Other is noted in the secondary literature and made by Levinas in *Otherwise Than Being*.279 Given the interchangeable nature of “love” and “responsibility,” and “Other” and “neighbor,” it is not surprising Levinas equates the command “Thou shalt not kill” with the commands “Thou shalt love the neighbor” and “Thou shalt love the stranger.”280 This ethical command indicates not only that one is responsible for not putting the lives of human others in direct threat of mortal danger but also for supporting the life of the Other: for loving the neighbor. As Levinas explains in *Alterity and Transcendence*, the commandment not to kill means “Thou shalt cause thy neighbor to live.”281 Levinas uses these commandments to express the signification of the face. They represent the ethical command I encounter in the face of the Other, the Other’s power over me in her or his powerlessness.

**Residual Points of Precaution**

Despite the apparent similarity between their ethics, within *Works of Love* there is a residue of what Levinas finds troublesome about Kierkegaard’s thought as portrayed by Silentio in *Fear and Trembling*. This residue leaves the text, and Kierkegaardian ethics, open to the reproof of Levinas’s initial points of precaution and is found primarily in the “as yourself” aspect of the love command, the salvation of the religious individual, and God’s position as the “middle term” or mediator between individuals.


279 Llewelyn, “Who or What or Whot?” 70; Jaime Ferreira, “Kierkegaard and Levinas on Four Elements of the Biblical Love Commandment,” in *Kierkegaard and Levinas: Ethics, Politics, and Religion*, ed. J. Aaron Simmons and David Wood (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 85. References to the term “neighbor” in which it is clear that the neighbor is the Other can be found on the following pages of *Otherwise*, with direct correlations between the Other and the neighbor indicated by bold text: Levinas, *Otherwise*, xix, 11, 12, 13, 16, 46, 47, 48, 55, 83, 84, 85, 88, 89, 91, 92, 93, 100, 115, 121, 123, 124, 126, 128, 138, 140, 144, 150, 153, 157, 159, 161, 162, 166, 181, 192, 193.


“AS YOURSELF”

One potential residual concern within *Works of Love* is found in the “as yourself” aspect of the Kierkegaardian love command. The command to love the neighbor “as yourself” seems to promote self-love, enmeshing ethics with an affirmation of the ‘I’. Arroyo admits the “as yourself” aspect of the command appears to be infected with egoism insofar as love for the neighbor is connected with this love of the self. 282 Commanded love is a need to love but one in which the need for love is also recognized. 283 This need is “in accord” with the command to love since one must be in relation with love, loved by God, in order to love others properly. Prosser explains this need for love, claiming the “as yourself” indicates “a proper sense of self” is a prerequisite for the relation with the neighbor and that this relation derives from a proper God-relation. 284 Westphal also understands this aspect of the command as signifying the importance and “inseparability” of proper self-love for love of the neighbor, which is derived from proper love of God. 285 Likewise, Ferreria believes the “as yourself” points out that the requirements for neighbor love include that you should love the neighbor as you ought to love yourself and as you have been loved by God. 286 In order to love the neighbor, the lover needs to have the correct understanding of love and correct self-love, both of which can only be had in relation to God. Every individual must relate herself first “to God and the God-demand” and only then can an individual properly relate herself in love to another. 287 Arroyo argues, quite convincingly, that Kierkegaard is defended by his own qualification of what it means to love yourself since the self-love involved in commanded neighbor love is self-denial. 288 It is difficult to maintain that the “as yourself” aspect of the command represents an indelible case of egoism and so to use this residue in support of a

286 Ferreira, “Kierkegaard and Levinas,” 93.
Levinasian critique of Kierkegaard. However, the “as yourself” aspect still proves problematic for several reasons.

One issue Levinas would have with the “as yourself” is that it does not mandate one should give in a way Levinas equates with ethics. In Of God Who Comes to Mind, Levinas discusses how the commandment (as translated by Buber and Rosenzweig) interprets the final word “komacha, ‘as yourself’,” as distinct from the preceding parts of the verse, imbuing it with a different and decidedly Levinasian meaning: “Love your neighbor; this work is (as) yourself,” or “Love your neighbor; this work is like yourself; love your neighbor; he is yourself; it is this love of neighbor which is yourself.” Who I am, my subjectivity is tied up with this work—love or responsibility for the Other/neighbor; it is myself, for only in my responsibility for the other, in the giving of myself, do I gain this unique selfhood. For Levinas, I give of myself and do not simply serve as a vessel through which God gives or loves. John Llewelyn points out that the source of love is essential; for Levinas it is of “my love” of which I give instead of “the love of God or the love that God is.”

Kierkegaardian self-renunciation, and so proper love of self and neighbor, is a giving up of selfish motives through approaching God. God is therefore a necessary part of the self-renunciation at work in Kierkegaard’s ethics of neighbor-love. Kierkegaard’s ethics is not a call to action on behalf of the Other but action on behalf of God. Answering the command to neighbor love is like being a vessel for the love of God to pass through. The lover “is completely and wholly transformed into being simply an active power in the hands of God.” The giving of Kierkegaardian ethics is a giving of oneself to God, who is then used

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290 Llewelyn, “Who or What or Whot?” 70.

291 Kierkegaard, Works of Love, 188.

292 Ibid., 260.
by God as an instrument of neighbor love. This differs from a loving response to an immediate neighbor.

Another concern with “as yourself” is that, by way of this aspect of the command, Kierkegaard’s idea of proper love mandates that one never love another (other than God) more than oneself, precluding the possibility that the other can be more important than the I. In effect, this precludes the possibility of the Levinasian ethical relation and subjectivity. Contra Kierkegaard, Levinas insists I am commanded to love the Other more than, and not just as, myself. Love, or responsibility for the Other, is central to my formation of self, which means that if ‘I’ am to be at all, as a unique and ethical individual, I must love my neighbor more than myself. The ethical relation encompasses this essential asymmetry. It can be helpful to translate this back into terms of responsibility. If I am to be a conscious individual, I must already be responsible for others; within sociality, “Each of us is guilty before everyone for everyone, and I more than the others.” That Levinas finds the command not to kill and the command to love the neighbor synonymous is not only a point which brings out the similarity between his and Kierkegaard’s ethics, but one which alludes to what he finds unacceptable about the “as yourself” aspect of Kierkegaardian ethics: that it commands love of the neighbor but does not see this as equal to being-for-the other in a way that the Other’s death, and conversely the Other’s life, becomes more of a concern for me than my own: that I love the neighbor more than myself.

**THE HAPPY END**

Another potential remainder of precaution within *Works of Love* is found in the salvation of the religious individual. Levinas asks an important question concerning salvation and its place in relation to ethics, “Doesn’t a phenomenon like Auschwitz invite you […] to think the moral law independently of the Happy End?” Levinas is attempting to sketch an ethics that allows a full break with egoism in all of its forms, even the egoism admitted by inclusion of a ‘happy end’. That the religious individual in Kierkegaard, despite loving the

293 Levinas, *Otherwise*, 146. This is Levinas’s paraphrase of a favored line from Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*.

294 Wright, Hughes, and Ainley, “The Paradox,” 176.
neighbör, returns to itself in salvation, is supposed by Levinas to demarcate a sort of egoïsm he will continue to find incompatible with the ethics he describes.

Arroyo admits that one can perceive in Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the self’s relation to God, coupled with the attention he pays to hope and the concern he shows for salvation, fertile ground for a critique such as Levinas’s since it can appear that one loves the neighbor in order to gain salvation or union with God. The correct relation to God, as obedience to God’s command, saves one from despair in Kierkegaard’s thought, “Hence, it appears that Kierkegaard implicitly introduces into his ethics an egoïstic motive on the part of the self in obeying God’s commandment.” Arroyo maintains that this should not be understood in terms of egoïsm, in light of the great effort undertaken in *Works of Love* to denounce self-love. It is the relation to God that leads one to obey God’s command to love one’s neighbor and therefore, such love does not arise in self-love or in the effort to seek out salvation for the self but in the love of God.

Arroyo is not denying that salvation or hope exists within Kierkegaard’s thought but asserting it exists as a side-effect and not the main event or motivator of the God-relation and neighbor-love. This side-effect salvation is supported on Arroyo’s account due to Kierkegaard’s consistent insistence that commanded love must be self-sacrificing and that God is not even impressed with such sacrifice, which gains the lover nothing, not even salvation. Arroyo claims one can understand the role of salvation as non-egoïstic since the salvation or happiness the self happens to receive when aligning itself properly with God is not the goal or purpose of the self in this alignment or in the obedience to God’s commands that follow from it. Westphal makes a similar claim when he argues one can act disinterestedly even if eternal happiness is placed before one as a goal.

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295 Arroyo, “Unselfish Salvation,” 166
296 Ibid.
297 Ibid.
298 Ibid., 167.
299 Ibid.
300 Ibid.
If it were the case that one loved God and obeyed the love command as a means to gain salvation, Levinas would have every right to question and criticize this salvation’s place in Kierkegaard’s ethics for, as Simmons mentions, in this circumstance, salvation would be “inherently egoist.”\textsuperscript{302} It does not seem that Kierkegaard is suggesting that one love God or the neighbor in order to gain salvation since, as Arroyo and Westphal maintain, Kierkegaard petitions against self-love and egoism within \textit{Works of Love}. It is possible, however, that Levinas would find the salvation of Kierkegaard inherently egoistic for a different reason. The inclusion of salvation in the ethical outline of Kierkegaard could be seen as inherently egoistic from a Levinasian standpoint insofar as it enacts any return to the self at all. Levinas may not be solely concerned about whether or not the religious individual in Kierkegaard is motivated to commit acts of love in order to gain eternal salvation/God’s love, though this would be a more obviously troublesome state of affairs. It is possible he would be equally concerned that, regardless of motivation, the religious individual is ensured salvation, an eternal return to self. The fact that God’s love and an eternal recurrence of the entity of the religious individual is assured means that no matter how much a religious individual renounces oneself on Kierkegaard’s account, she will inevitably return to that self by way of an immortal soul, in an eternal identification, a perpetual ipseity. The hope for eternal life or salvation that taints Kierkegaard’s work represents an affirmation of the self, even though this self is one that has progressed through the stages of existence and been purified by God in faith. The type of salvation Kierkegaard’s thought entails is one that remains within being, placing the ultimate meaning or end of subjectivity within being’s move. This type of salvation preserves the self’s enchainment to its being in the form of eternal life, even if it also requires one to be-for-the-other in the command to love the neighbor. What bothers Levinas is not the quality of the self that returns but the movement of return. Part of his project to show that ethics is first philosophy is to provide an alternative to the assumed dichotomy between eternal life as an incessant return to the self and a complete negation of the self in death.\textsuperscript{303} This alternative is being-for-the-Other, in which my life gains meaning but one that does not culminate in an eternal recurrence to the self.

\textsuperscript{302} Simmons, “Existential Appropriations,” 59.
\textsuperscript{303} “Death is interpreted in the whole philosophical and religious tradition either as a passage to
Merold Westphal complains that within Levinas, there is no hope for the future, in a sense, no salvation, while for Kierkegaard faith and hope, or salvation, are inextricably linked together for “the whole problematic of faith is portrayed in terms of the hope for eternal happiness.” Westphal concludes, “Levinas has a philosophy of sin without salvation,” “a theology of law without grace.” Westphal champions the Kierkegaardian God and point of view because this God gives us hope. However, Levinas finds happiness in enjoyment to be prerequisite to the command. The situation Westphal proposes does not occur on Levinas’s account – there would be no command without the enjoyment, or happiness, an individual gains by virtue of being alive. For Levinas, if there is any hope or “salvation” within ethics, it is a salvation from the self, from Being as opposed to a salvation of being. Such “salvation” from enchainment in being to oneself is only gotten on Levinas’s account by way of loving the other more than myself, through the giving of myself to the Other, being-for-the-Other – a meaning despite death but one not reliant on the continuation of the I’s existence beyond death. Levinas holds that “The future for which the work is undertaken must be posited from the start as indifferent to my death” – my giving should not include “the time of a personal immortality” but “works in an eschatology without hope for oneself.” Whether just a side effect or not, that the religious individual receives salvation of an immortal soul means that the future toward which the religious individual works is not indifferent to her death and is an eschatology in which hope for oneself remains a central feature.

THE MIDDLE TERM

The most bothersome issue that resurfaces in *Works of Love* pertains to the divergence between Levinas and Kierkegaard as articulated in their disagreement over the transcendent or wholly Other. That God is the middle term for Kierkegaard will cause difficulties from a Levinasian viewpoint. For Levinas, the transcendent Other is the human nothingness or as a passage to another existence, continuing in a new setting.” Levinas, *Totality*, 232.

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305 Ibid., 41, 165.
306 Ibid., 72.
307 Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” 349.
Other, while for Kierkegaard, it is God. This speaks to a difference in the structure of ethics on their accounts, since for Levinas the Other will always be placed between myself and God, while for Kierkegaard God will always mediate between the neighbor and myself. In other words, proper relation with God is foundational to ethical relations with other persons on Kierkegaard’s account, while the opposite is true for Levinas, who admits of a God relation only founded in and arising from the ethical relation. This refers to the issue of who can qualify as the Other who interrupts the cogito. There is a pervasive belief that God can serve in the role of the Levinasian Other and that parallels between Kierkegaard and Levinas can be drawn based on this. It is thought Kierkegaard and Levinas put forth a similar ethics because God is able to serve in this role and open an individual to the ethical responsibility to love human beings. However, God as mediator between the religious individual and neighbor delineates a structure that Levinas will continue to perceive as lending itself to violence and supportive of egoism. Furthermore, God does not appear to qualify as a Levinasian Other.

That the God-relation is the axiom from which neighbor love/ethics is deduced finds ethics placed in a secondary position. This placement constitutes a surpassing of ethics at risk of providing asylum for violence. This may not be literal violence of the sort Abraham was prepared to carry out, but it represents the possibility of violence nonetheless, the potential violence of the religious relation’s failure to lead to justice. As Brian Prosser claims, the issue of the God-relation being beyond judgment or justice plagues not only Fear and Trembling but is still found within Works of Love. Kierkegaard sets up a double standard – God must scrutinize every human relation, but the God-relation itself is not open to scrutiny. Levinas sets up a standard by which every relation is kept in check. On Levinas’s account, it is paramount that the ethical relation be able to call the God-relation, along with ontology, philosophy, the state, etc., into question. Kierkegaard is also concerned with the judgment of

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309 Prosser, “Conscientious Subjectivity,” 408. Prosser maintains that other authored works are capable of mitigating Levinas’s critique.
relations, insisting God serve as the middle term between neighbors so that a term higher than the relation itself can insure human relations. Kierkegaard contends God is needed as a middle term because only God constitutes a proper authority able to issue the love command and scrutinize inter-human relations.310 Brian Prosser claims Kierkegaard is aware of a possibility that Levinas never takes into account – that “I may become completely deaf to the command, as it issues from the other person” and so that it may be necessary for the command to “require a power higher than both me and the Other to guarantee the possibility of conscientious subjectivity [i.e., ethical subjectivity].”311 He cites this as an adequate reason to require that God be the middle term between persons and so serve as a guarantor of conscientious subjectivity. However, Levinas is aware of the possibility that one may respond to her ethical obligation through refusal. Furthermore, if one accepts Levinas’s ethical project at all, one accepts the implicit guarantee of the possibility of conscientious subjectivity. In addition, it is not clear that God would be able to serve in the capacity of a guarantor, for if one can become deaf to the call of the Other, it is equally possible that one may grow deaf to God’s command or that this command can in some way contradict the Levinasian ethical relation. Levinas does not advocate the need, or even the possibility, of a guarantor to ensure that our ethical efforts are not futile. What he is concerned with is that ethics be structured in such a way as to provide the needed checks and balances able to guarantee that ethical action and the potential improvement of the totality will always be possible and that I will always be obligated, whether or not I welcome or refuse, ignore, and otherwise become “deaf” to the command.

That the I is in direct relation to God as opposed to the human Other resurrects the issue of violence. In Works of Love, love of God is equal to obedience as evinced by Kierkegaard’s discussion of whether one is able to love another more than oneself wherein he explains one should love God more than oneself, which is to give one’s unconditional obedience to God. One must comply and cannot deny a request from God, for this unconditional obedience equal to love of God dictates that one obey “even if what he

310 Westphal, Levinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue, 56.
demands of you may seem to you to be to your own harm—yes, harmful to his cause.”

Here we find Kierkegaard condoning or promoting an unconditional obedience to God just as his pseudonym lauded Abraham’s unconditional obedience in faith as the highlight of the Akedah. This warns that there may not be so easy a transmutation between the terms “love” in Kierkegaard and “responsibility” in Levinas as it first appears, since Levinas never describes the responsibility I have to the Other as unconditional obedience but as an infinite obligation. The difference between these two ways of understanding love/responsibility is the difference between an ethics in which one is responsible to and for all other human beings, i.e., any relation with another mortal can be or become the ethical relation, and an ethics derived from a single relation of unconditional obedience, i.e. only a relation with God is able to make one responsible for others but this relation does not make one responsible to others or for God. It is the responsibility for the Other that, according to Levinas, rids the I of the negative aspects he finds within the Kierkegaardian subject, including egoism. The neighbor as understood by Levinas is the one to, before, and for whom I answer, and in this sense differs from Kierkegaard’s neighbor in Works of Love to whom I am commanded by God. The love I have for the neighbor and the responsibility I have for the Other seem to be comparable on their accounts, but an issue emerges if God is understood as serving in the role of Other.

God in the role of Other leads to a religious interiority, which may be called upon to love others but which does not lead toward justice and language. This inserts once more concerns regarding divine command theory. If love of God is unconditional obedience and adoration of God, as it is defined in Works of Love, then it cannot be foretold what God may command. Commanded love and its source are both subject to an essential misunderstanding by the world: this may include what God commands one to do in the name of love. If God is the mediator, then it is plausible that in certain cases the command to love can be carried out in what is perceived as harm of the neighbor or that a different command can trump the love command altogether. What is to stop the expression of neighbor-love from involving what is murder on all other accounts, just as Abraham’s love of God and Isaac still nearly resulted in Isaac’s death? For Levinas, the face of the human Other is the widow, orphan, and stranger –

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312 Kierkegaard, Works of Love, 36.
the one who suffers. The Other prompts my response as responsibility. The only possibility is
to respond either by refusing or by giving to the Other. This prompting or command in no
way leaves open the possibility of an unconditional obedience to the Other. On a Levinasian
framework, the third is always already present, and the ethical relation with the Other opens
upon the relation with all others in justice. Levinas has attempted, and whether he has
succeeded is a matter of debate and further research, to describe a way in which a balance of
powers functions within subjectivity and inter-subjective relations. The Other calls the I into
question, the ethical relation between the I and the Other calls the system and institutions into
question, and the third party, justice, reason and the institutions founded by the ethical
relation, call the ethical relation itself into question by denying it an enclosed intimacy and so
declining the Other an absolute authority.

Another issue accompanying God as the middle term within *Works of Love* is one that
resurfaces from the issue in *Fear and Trembling* of Abraham’s absolute relation to the
absolute making his relation to Isaac relative. Jeffrey Dudiak makes the point that Levinas is
dissatisfied with the ethics he finds in Kierkegaard because, in its focus on God as a middle
term, it represents another form of reduction of the Other to the same.\(^{313}\) As discussed in the
Levinas Summary portion of this text, ontology consists of grasping what is other “in its
generality” by way of a third and neutral term and so rests upon “the essential self-
sufficiency of the same.”\(^{314}\) This third, neutral term deadens the “shock of the encounter of
the same with the other,” robbing the other of its alterity.\(^{315}\) God as a mediator serves as this
third neutral term between the I and human Other. In the role of mediator, God “deadens” the
shock of the human neighbor, which assures any interaction with the human will be one of
reduction of the other to the same. If God is the wholly other, anything else is negated from
being wholly other, reducing all human relations to ones with a relative other.\(^{316}\) Since God
as the middle term serves as a mediation between me and the human Other, it “prescribes in
advance what one’s obligations to the other will be, meaning that the encounter with the

\(^{313}\) Dudiak, “The Greatest Commandment?” 107.
\(^{314}\) Levinas, *Totality*, 44.
\(^{315}\) Ibid., 42.
other will in fact always be an encounter with a same.\footnote{Ibid., 109.} This is a problem for Levinas because it characterizes an impenetrable egoism. The only way in which it would not characterize a reduction of the other to the same, and so a return to self delineating the structure of egoism, would be if God could serve in the role of the Levinasian Other. If God could serve in the role of the Levinasian Other, then the neighbor/human others would be analogous to the others/humanity at large to whom the Other further obligates the I. If God is capable of being the Other, the interlocutor with whom the I is in conversation, then Levinas and Kierkegaard really are proposing extraordinarily similar ethics. If it is at all likely that God is disqualified from serving in this role, then there is sufficient cause to suggest, as Levinas has, that Kierkegaard really may be supporting egoism and violence of some sort in his philosophical work.

The most striking shadow of doubt cast on the plausibility of God as the Levinasian Other is that God does not present as the face. Levinas restricts who may qualify as Other to what is, in its mortality and need, able to appeal to my responsibility. The face is a matter of “immediacy, being concerned for his death, i.e., immediately seeing him as deathly, as mortal.”\footnote{Rötzer, “Emmanuel Levinas,” 61-62.} For Levinas, it is only human beings that can fulfill the role of the Other.\footnote{Levinas, \textit{Totality}, 73. Some question whether non-human animals are also able to fulfill this role. Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco are among the philosophers who have worked on this issue, e.g., Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco, \textit{Radicalizing Levinas} (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010).} Levinas deliberately sets aside the question of God’s existence in his phenomenological pursuit.\footnote{Dudiak, “The Greatest Commandment?” 116-117; Llewelyn, “Who or What or Whot?” 76.} While he does not deny the existence of God, he will not allow that God is able to serve in the role of Other. One cannot be for God as one is for the Other: one can have no influence on the life of God and so cannot enter into a relation with God that would constitute an ethical relation in the Levinasian sense.\footnote{According to Prosser, the distinction between Levinas and Kierkegaard is evidenced in this disagreement over whether God can serve as an interlocutor, a possibility “Levinas appears to preclude.” Prosser, “Conscientious Subjectivity,” 398.} I cannot be-for-God against God’s death, and so cannot be responsible \textit{for} (the life and well-being of) God only \textit{to} God (obedient to God’s commands). Levinas uses the terminology “indigent and naked” to

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{Ibid., 109.}
\item \footnote{Rötzer, “Emmanuel Levinas,” 61-62.}
\item \footnote{Levinas, \textit{Totality}, 73. Some question whether non-human animals are also able to fulfill this role. Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco are among the philosophers who have worked on this issue, e.g., Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco, \textit{Radicalizing Levinas} (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010).}
\item \footnote{Dudiak, “The Greatest Commandment?” 116-117; Llewelyn, “Who or What or Whot?” 76.}
\item \footnote{According to Prosser, the distinction between Levinas and Kierkegaard is evidenced in this disagreement over whether God can serve as an interlocutor, a possibility “Levinas appears to preclude.” Prosser, “Conscientious Subjectivity,” 398.}
\end{itemize}
describe the body and uses similar terms when discussing the face of the Other as the needy one.\textsuperscript{322} The Other is in need of what I am also in need of, is also embodied, or else my gift or my giving to the Other would not be possible. Being embodied, the Other is able to be killed, is vulnerable to the implements of labor and war, and it is precisely this possibility that gives rise to the ethical command not to kill, the ethical individual’s responsibility for the Other, and the very meaning of the face. Of course, the Other is not only embodied, but transcendent, unable to be reduced to any corporeal representation or reduced to the same in consciousness, breaking every form in which I would grasp her, every thought in which I attempt to encompass her.

There are two requirements that need to be met in order to qualify as a Levinasian Other: the Other must be both higher and lower than the I. As discussed in the summary of Levinas’s work, this highness is one of transcendence, expressed in the I’s inability to reduce the Other to the same. The lowness of the Other is his or her need and destitution, her very mortality, and accordingly, the I’s ability/responsibility to meet this need and stave off this mortality. Though God would seem to qualify under the first, God does not appear to meet the second requirement. One could argue God fulfills both requirements, but this would necessitate a mortal, vulnerable God, a position most arguing for God \textit{qua} Other will reject.

The order of relations to fellow human beings and God in the position each thinker offers may merely propose two different ways of looking at the same basic structure.\textsuperscript{323} However, both parties invest much in the order of relations and in whom the subject initially encounters. The materials used and the order and manner in which they are placed greatly change the viability and soundness of any structure, and this is equally true for the ethical structure each thinker builds. While they share a similar skeletal form, Levinas and Kierkegaard’s ethical structures are built differently since they choose different foundations. For Kierkegaard, God is the foundation of ethics. For Levinas, ethics is the foundation for all else, including any relation with God. Disentangled from purely religious concerns, this means that Kierkegaard’s ethics is based upon an exclusive relationship, which is above

\textsuperscript{322} Levinas, \textit{Totality}, 129.

\textsuperscript{323} Dudiak makes this claim, identifying God and the neighbor as two sides of the same coin and asserting that “neither can be the means to or the result of the other.” Dudiak, “The Greatest Commandment?” 101.
reproach. Kierkegaard makes the God-relation primary in *Fear and Trembling* and in *Works of Love*, a primacy that, as Prosser notes, “grounds conscientious subjectivity in a single relationship that is uniquely without legitimate ‘distance with respect to obedience’.”324 In contrast, Levinas’s ethics is a relation, which inherently involves an admonishment of the relation itself, through the presence of the third.

Another reason for doubting God’s capacity for serving as Other is the suspicion Levinas expresses that within Kierkegaardian thought God is *experienced* and the command to love the neighbor is *consciously* considered, both therefore remaining dependent on ontology. If this suspicion is founded, it further stresses the idea that God cannot serve in the role of the Other, since the Other is not consciously considered but leads to consciousness. Since one’s responsibility for the neighbor is born of her relation with God, Kierkegaardian ethics as portrayed in *Works of Love* would remain founded in ontology rather than foundational to ontology. This is another way of phrasing the fact that ethics, as understood by Levinas, is still secondary in Kierkegaard, and one which revives the issue of egoism, for Levinas’s concern over Kierkegaard’s God as one “in permanent danger of turning into a protector of all egoisms” revolves around the issue of how the interruption of the ego God-as-Other makes possible is based in experience instead of being foundational to it.325 Interruptions of the *cogito* proposing an affected psyche whose anxiousness would upset or disturb the immanence of consciousness, i.e., those starting from a mental state of “fear or trembling before the sacred,” unfurl from experiences and so remain founded on ontology.326

Levinas sees the relation between the I and the Other as prior to religion and what gives rise to it; it is then distinct also from any religious experience as revelation within being.327 Religious experience, as experience, is still connected to and submerged within

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324 Prosser, “Conscientious Subjectivity,” 411, 416. Prosser suggests Kierkegaard could perhaps answer Levinas’s concern on this point without denying God special authority, in texts such as *The Book of Adler*, but finds that it has not been properly undertaken within *Works of Love*.

325 Levinas, *Otherwise*, 161.

326 Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” 134.

327 “It is the latent birth of religion in the other (*autrui*), prior to emotions or voices, prior to ‘religious experience’, which speaks of revelation in terms of the disclosure of being, when it is a question of an unwonted access, in the heart of my responsibility, to an unwonted disturbance of being.” Ibid., 143.
being, and “refers to the ‘I think’.”\textsuperscript{328} Even religion distanced from ‘rational thought’ is ultimately founded in being, since it remains based in experience. Levinas notes, “Religious ‘revelation’ is therewith already assimilated to philosophical disclosure; even dialectical theology maintains this assimilation.”\textsuperscript{329} Dialectical theology holds that rational attempts to understand the religious break down and reveal paradoxes but that the doctrines of the religion, from which these paradoxes arise, must be believed by an individual in faith.

Kierkegaard is a prominent figure in the dialectical theological tradition, so the charge Levinas lodges against dialectical theology applies to Kierkegaardian thought. Kierkegaard’s religious revelation, including the love command, has already espoused philosophical disclosure and therefore ontology. This is in opposition to Levinasian thought in which the ethical command of the Other establishes or generates language and consciousness.

A religious individual understands his own existence in terms of experiences lived through, understands God in terms of being and presence, and claims to have experience of this being. In contrast, the overflowing of consciousness the “idea of infinity” represents is, according to Levinas, “the very absolution of the absolute.”\textsuperscript{330} For Levinas, the subject is a witness to the infinite, devoid of experience or proof of the infinite. This would hold true even in cases where the infinite is interpreted as God. God is “neither an object nor an interlocutor.”\textsuperscript{331} God is then not the first other I encounter, the most important other, or the absolutely other but is “other than the other (autre qu’autrui), other otherwise” meaning God is also other than the I, in the sense that God is transcendent and unforeseeable like the Other, but also other than the Other since God is “transcendent to the point of absence.”\textsuperscript{332} The I is unable to be in an immediate relation with God as she is with the Other. God cannot be a term within the ethical relation.

Kierkegaard claims the duty “to be in debt of love to one another” is a “Christian’s duty” implying that this duty does not apply to anyone other than those who take up the

\textsuperscript{328} Ibid., 135.
\textsuperscript{329} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{330} Ibid., 136.
\textsuperscript{331} Ibid., 141.
\textsuperscript{332} Ibid.
danger involved in being an authentic Christian.\textsuperscript{333} For Levinas, the “idea of infinity” is not “taken up.”\textsuperscript{334} For Kierkegaard, the command comes from God within a particular religious context, and so it appears to be something that must be chosen, taken up like one takes up one’s cross. One must accept the command (only) when one accepts God as an authority; the love command is reliant on acceptance of the Christian doctrine. The pagan is not held to the command, is free to decide whether she takes up this obligation at all. For Levinas, we are born into this responsibility toward the neighbor; our obligation to the Other is present before we are even conscious of it. While there remains the choice of how to respond to such an obligation, we do not freely assume it. In addition to consciousness, the biblical command also seems to require language, which Levinas will maintain presupposes the ethical relation.

Kierkegaard’s ethics appeals to the Christian, one who in faith wrestles with and accepts the particular paradox of God incarnate. That only those who choose to adhere to a certain set of religious absurdities by faith are ethically obligated, and not all human beings by virtue of their very language and sociality, drastically minimizes the value and scope of ethics. While Kierkegaard insists the command does not arise within the human but is given by God, Levinas equates the command with what it is to be human and so appears in every human, as the basis of their subjectivity, regardless of what absurdities or creeds they may consciously cling to thereafter. This responsibility means: “The I is not simply conscious of this necessity to respond, as if it were a matter of an obligation or a duty about which a decision could be made; rather the I is, by its very position, responsibility through and through,” even “in its as for itself [a subject] is already […] substitution or expiation for others.”\textsuperscript{335} While for Kierkegaard my existence is always already a relation with God, be it a miss-relation until the religious stage of existence is reached, it is only after one turns inward to relate with and renounce oneself to God that one is called upon to love one’s neighbor.

By framing ethics within terms of the religious, whereby the command arises within a particular religious framework, Kierkegaard also openly rejects the idea that ethics can be

\textsuperscript{333} Kierkegaard, \textit{Works of Love}, 196.

\textsuperscript{334} Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” 138.

\textsuperscript{335} Levinas, “Transcendence,” 17; Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” 353; Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” 145.
universal, that the universal can reflect the fact that it is itself an outgrowth of a more fundamental ethical order. One ramification of denying ethics any universal significance, or any impact on the universal, is the limitation of an individual’s power to come to the assistance of the neighbor. Kierkegaard’s ethics have no effect on society at large. For Levinas, however, my obligation to the Other leads to the ability to discern between universal systems, i.e., public institutions/States, and so to the possible betterment of these systems on behalf of my neighbor. Levinas includes in his ethics a social responsibility that is found wanting in Kierkegaard. This lack of social responsibility, mirrored in the necessary silence of Silentio’s Abraham, and the insistence in *Works of Love* that current conditions should be accepted in the name of providence, is evidence for the violence Levinas critiques Kierkegaard’s thought of leading to. In not offering criteria for discernment between universal systems or any way in which to improve these systems, Kierkegaard leaves open the possibility of allowing his ethics to support, by disabling it from critiquing, violence in the political or social sphere. By contrast, Levinas will insist, “For the political order, for the good political order, we are still responsible.”336 Through the good political order, through actions taken to improve the totality/universal, the life of the Other is supported; the neighbor is loved. Levinas explains, “We must use the ontological *for the sake of the other*; to ensure the survival of the other we must resort to the technico-political systems of means and ends.”337 Similar to the way in which Levinas sees Abraham’s return to both the universal ethical and his own ethical as the highlight of the Akedah narrative, he asserts “the return to ontology, not ontology as such, but to theory in general, or if you wish, justice, that must be added to charity.”338

While providing for the basic needs of one’s neighbor are one way in which love of the neighbor may be expressed, overall Kierkegaard emphasizes the task of helping one’s neighbor love God. He also explicitly denies the value of assisting one’s neighbor via improvement of her position in life or improvements of institutions and societies. Christianity

337 Kearney, “Ethics of the Infinite Interview,” 64.
and religious individuals do not seek to bring about change in the external conditions of the world because the inward change of the individual is what matters.\textsuperscript{339} While this may incorporate some transformation of outward behavior, there is a decidedly anti-activist leaning to Kierkegaard’s understanding of spiritual change granted by the God-relation and neighbor-love. This seems to imply that Christianity will not work towards social or political change.\textsuperscript{340} Kierkegaard describes the attempt to improve the totality/universal, e.g., systems and societies, as being based on “an activist conception of need” and “a materialistic conception […] of the ability to do something to meet need.”\textsuperscript{341} Kierkegaard claims those who would espouse this activist conception of need would reason in the following way: “The poor, the wretched may die—therefore it is very important that help be given.”\textsuperscript{342} This seems to be what Levinas would want to say about my responsibility to and for the Other. According to Kierkegaard, what matters from the vantage point of the eternal is not what is given but how it is given: “That a man dies is, eternally understood, no misfortune, but that mercifulness has not been practised is.”\textsuperscript{343} Levinas would perhaps say that ethically understood, it is the highest misfortune that the other human should die. It matters less how I give so long as I give – that I respond. At the very least, the I is responsible and obligated to respond. It should give us pause to consider that social change and the betterment of the totality and institutions are excluded from the ways in which Kierkegaard’s love of the neighbor and response to the love command may manifest themselves. Levinas’s major concern with Kierkegaardian thought is that it does not lead back to justice/the universal. For Levinas, everything leads back to ethics. He pursues his ethical project, tells “this long story about the face,” because ethics is the foundation of justice, able to interrupt and improve upon it. Justice needs continual improvement because it harbors violence, often overlooking the needs and tears of the Other. This improvement of justice can even reach the level of

\textsuperscript{339} Kierkegaard, \textit{Works of Love}, 137-138, 140, 145.

\textsuperscript{340} Ibid., 81-82.

\textsuperscript{341} Ibid., 302.

\textsuperscript{342} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{343} Ibid.
improvement of universality itself. One example Levinas gives of the improvement of universality itself is the “abolition of the death penalty.” But, no matter how much improved justice becomes, “there is a place for charity after justice,” the ethical relation remains essential since the I can see the tears and answer the needs of the Other where justice fails. Levinas rejects God as the other party of the ethical relation because placing God in this position, though it leads to the religious individual being commanded to love her neighbor, does not lead to justice. In contrast, the encounter with the face in Levinas’s thought opens the subject to the exteriority of a wholly other who justifies the subject’s interiority and institutes a relationship that founds justice and potentially improves it.

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344 Wright, Hughes, and Ainley, “The Paradox,” 175.
345 Ibid.
CONCLUSION

Recent interest in the relation between Levinas and Kierkegaard indicates similarities regarding their critiques of philosophy and accounts of transcendence. Levinas praises the concept of truth persecuted and the separated subjectivity endorsed by Kierkegaard but critiques Kierkegaardian thought of also endorsing egoism and violence. Levinas suggests that the entire argument Kierkegaard mounts against philosophy is based on subjectivity as egoism, ultimately making a return to itself in the form of a concern for salvation. Levinas perceives violence in Kierkegaard’s philosophy at the moment when ethics is transcended for the religious, and this threat is particularly apparent within *Fear and Trembling*, where Levinas understands Kierkegaard’s affinity for the Akedah, Abraham’s binding of Isaac, as indicative of the negative implications of his philosophical thought. Levinas points to Kierkegaard’s use of Abraham as an example of subjectivity transcending the ethical for the religious. Such transcendence of the ethical allows for the possibility of Abraham’s sacrificing his son, Isaac, in unconditional obedience to God and in an overlooking of his responsibility to and for his son. Levinas maintains that the story can have a different interpretation in which the highlight is Abraham’s being able to be brought back to the ethical order since he “had sufficient distance with respect to that obedience to hear the second voice.”

Both reasons Kierkegaard’s pseudonym cites as the impetus for Abraham’s sacrificing Isaac amount to egoism: doing it for God’s sake and doing it for his own sake in order to prove himself to God. The inward spiritual movement of faith, which marks an absolute relation to the absolute in *Fear and Trembling*, is seen by Levinas as a movement that, while initially towards God, ultimately makes the movement back to the self. For Levinas, identity of self is tantamount to a reduction of the other to the same and return to self, or expectation thereof, no matter how seemingly selfless, remains within the movement

of egology. Abraham makes an egoistic move in his movement toward God and obedience to God’s command. Need is indicative of a return to the self and Levinas finds what he would identify as need at the base of Abraham’s desire to please God, to prove his faith, and in his expectancy of receiving back what he is prepared to sacrifice. Additionally, that Abraham relates to the absolute absolutely in faith means he can only relate to Isaac relatively. The self-reductive movement of egoism becomes apparent in any relation which disallows the possibility of encountering the face of the human Other.

While it is widely accepted Silentio identifies ethics with the universal, i.e., either Hegelian Sittlichkeit or Kantian Moralität, the idea that this is the only ethics Kierkegaard himself perceives is deemed naïve at best. Many claim Levinas exhibits such naïveté in his critique, reducing Kierkegaard’s understanding of the ethical to Silentio’s portrayal of it within Fear and Trembling or other pseudonymous texts. However, it was shown that Levinas’s critique ultimately wages a battle against what he finds to be a suspension of the ethical relation itself, reflected in the way in which Silentio’s Abraham surpasses the ethical universal and evidenced in his willingness to kill Isaac. Though he uses the term ethics equivocally in his critique, Levinas does not do so in utter naïveté since he is expressing dissatisfaction for the surpassing of ethics in both senses of the word.

There is a significant sense in which Levinas understands one’s ethical duty to consist in being subject to the universal since the ethical relation leads to the universal/objectivity even as it preserves the separation of the subject. That the call of God or the Other can be weighed against the demands of justice, and not only that the ethical as universal can be suspended by the ethical relation, is essential to Levinasian ethics. Whether it is solely Sittlichkeit, or whether Kierkegaard does promote an ethics similar to Levinas’s in authored works, or even within Fear and Trembling as some suggest, Kierkegaard places God before the human Other, allowing for an exclusive and mediating God-relation and the violence and egoism this entails.

In the secondary literature, there is wide support for the position that Levinas’s critique of Kierkegaard is based on a misunderstanding or poor scholarship, and many point

to the authored *Works of Love* as a text which, in its seeming similarity to Levinas’s own ethics and more straightforward portrayal of Kierkegaard’s position, eradicates or greatly mitigates Levinas’s concerns. I have contended that Levinas’s concern over Kierkegaard is merited since it can be shown that cause for the type of concern Levinas raises with respect to Kierkegaardian thought still exists in *Works of Love*.

To show Levinas’s critique of Kierkegaard can be justified, I outlined the basic ethical project of Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*, considered his allegations of egoism and violence in Kierkegaard, examined *Fear and Trembling*, the work of Kierkegaard that Levinas most frequently criticizes, and analyzed the authored *Works of Love* to determine whether there was any residue of what Levinas found troublesome within Kierkegaard as represented in *Fear and Trembling*.

I found that *Works of Love* does seem to allay Levinas’s concerns because the renunciation of the self prominent in the commanded love Kierkegaard endorses contests the claim of egoism, while the loving aspect of the command to love the neighbor, which serves as the focal point of the text, opposes the “violence” of the God-relation. Furthermore, Kierkegaard himself highlights how egoism is the enemy of neighbor-love and maintains that any love seeking repayment is selfish. As Kierkegaard often states, God is love, and God commands the individual to love. If God is love, it is difficult to maintain that a relation with a loving God will lead to violence, like that nearly witnessed in the Akedah, especially when this relation is claimed to lead to love of all. Not only do Levinas’s concerns over egoism and violence in Kierkegaard seem unfounded when *Works of Love* is considered, but the text appears similar to Levinas’s. Claims that *Works of Love* answers Levinas’s complaints gain strength from apparent correlations between the significant terms of their work. The term “responsibility” in Levinas is equivalent to Kierkegaard’s commanded love; the term “neighbor” correlates with the Levinasian Other; and the command “Thou shalt not kill” is comparable to “Thou shalt love the neighbor.”

However, residue of Levinas’s points of precaution regarding Kierkegaardian thought are not eliminated by *Works of Love*. An analysis of *Works of Love* has shown that Levinas still has several reasons to be concerned about Kierkegaardian thought. Firstly, in this authored work, Kierkegaard continues to exemplify the God-relation as one that is not open to scrutiny and demands unconditional obedience, therefore exhibiting a basis for violence in
its failure to lead to justice. If love of God is unconditional obedience and adoration of God, as it is defined in *Works of Love*, it cannot be foretold what God may command, and it is plausible that in certain cases the command to love can be carried out in what is perceived as harm of the neighbor, or that a different command can trump the love command altogether.

Secondly, The command to love the neighbor “as yourself” seems to promote self-love, enmeshing ethics with an affirmation of the ‘I’, though it is difficult to maintain that the “as yourself” aspect of the command represents an indelible case of egoism since the self-love involved in commanded neighbor love is self-denial. Despite this, the “as yourself” aspect does remain problematic since it does not mandate one should give in a way Levinas equates with ethics; Kierkegaard’s idea of proper love precluding the possibility that the other can be more important than the I and, in effect, the possibility of the Levinasian ethical relation, by mandating that one never love another (other than God) more than oneself.

Additionally, that the religious individual in Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*, despite loving the neighbor, returns to itself in salvation, is supposed by Levinas to demarcate a sort of egoism he will continue to find incompatible with the ethics he describes. Levinas is concerned that, regardless of motivation, the religious individual is ensured salvation, an eternal return to self, ergo egoism from Levinas’s perspective.

Finally, that God is the mediator between the religious individual and neighbor in *Works of Love* delineates a structure Levinas will perceive as lending itself to violence and supportive of egoism. That God is the necessary “middle term” between the I and the neighbor insures that the relation with the neighbor is one of reduction of the Other to the same and so constitutes egoism from a Levinasian perspective. That the God-relation is the axiom from which ethics is derived still finds ethics, on Levinas’s understanding, in a secondary place within Kierkegaardian thought. In its surpassing of Levinas’s ethics for the religious, it represents a potential violence. The concerns associated with God as the middle term could potentially be answered by viewing God in the role of the Levinasian Other. However, Levinas would not allow that God could serve in this capacity because God does not meet the requirements for presenting as Other, namely, God is not lower than the I: God is not mortal or in need.

In conclusion, that *Works of Love* proves to be an asylum for potential causes of concern regarding Kierkegaardian thought verifies Levinas’s critique is warranted and that
his points of precaution should not merely be considered a misunderstanding. Levinas’s complaints cast a needed shadow of doubt onto Kierkegaardian faith-based ethics and are not simply a byproduct of Levinas’s alleged poor Kierkegaardian scholarship or unfamiliarity with *Works of Love*.

Though there is ample residue within *Works of Love* of what Levinas finds troublesome in *Fear and Trembling*, other texts by both thinkers should be considered in order to further validate Levinas’s critique. In particular, *Otherwise than Being* and its relation to Kierkegaardian thought should be considered to determine if later Levinasian thought further supports or mitigates his concerns. More research must also be undertaken in regard to Kierkegaard’s overall corpus to determine whether, when all of his work is taken into consideration, Levinas’s complaints can be further answered or supported. In addition, a more thorough investigation of the way in which the ethical relation founds justice, and how this is related to Levinas’s understanding of God, is needed, for it may be that the similarity between the two thinkers is strengthened or weakened through the details of this movement.
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