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# PREFERENTIAL AND NON-PREFERENTIAL LOVE IN LIGHT OF KIERKEGAARD'S THOUGHT

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## Abstract

The main topic of the article is the relation between preferential and non-preferential love in relation to Kierkegaard. The author first presents two models of this relation: the model of God filter, developed by John Lippitt, and the faith-like model, advocated by Sharon Krishek. The latter represents Kierkegaard's first view on this relation, which can be found in his 'Fear and Trembling'. The second can be found in 'Works of Love'. The author accepts the faith-like model as the appropriate one. On the basis of his original use of Brentano's mereological ontology regarding the relation between substance and accidents, presentation of the significance of becoming God's image and explanation of love as service or a way of helping others become better, he deepens the understanding of the faith-like model and additionally justifies it.

*Keywords:* Kierkegaard, love, Brentano, ontology

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## 1. Introduction

The problem of the relation between preferential and non-preferential love is an 'eternal' question, which has been gaining an additional topicality and new dimensions due to globalisation and the migrant crisis. In this article, I will present a discussion, in Kierkegaard's frame of reference, about the essence of love and the compatibility of non-preferential neighbourly love with preferential loves. In Kierkegaard's oeuvre, the most relevant work for this discussion is his *Works of Love* (1847). In addition, we should also mention *Fear and Trembling* (1843), *Either/Or* (1843), and *Philosophical Fragments* (1844). Among contemporary works, the most significant for this contribution are discussions by three Anglo-Saxon authors: M. Jamie Ferreira, John Lippitt and Sharon Krishek. The article consists of three main parts. In the first part, I present Sharon Krishek's position, tracing her faith-like model of love, which she discerned in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, her critique of Kierkegaard's position on love in *Works of Love*, and also her critique of Lippitt and Ferreira, who more or less defend the acceptability of Kierkegaard's position in *Works of Love*. Furthermore, I present Krishek's critique of Lippitt's idea of explaining love by

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using the metaphor of God filter. In the second part, I argue that Brentano's theory of substance and accident can be used to explain the relation we find in Kierkegaard between God's love, faith, non-preferential love and preferential loves. This is also the main original scientific contribution of this article. In the third part, I summarise my points and add a few observations about love as service, about its gratuitousness and about love as a means of bettering persons.

The essential difference between Krishek, who advocates the faith-like model of love, and Lippitt, who advocates the model of God filter, is the following:

1. For Krishek, neighbourly love is like a ground floor: it is an emotional disposition that consists of empathy, compassion, benevolence, etc., which we must equally direct at everyone, be it our spouse, a homeless person or even an enemy.
2. Both Lippitt and Krishek agree that (preferential) loves need to be purified and then neighbourly love and preferential loves can coexist. Where Krishek disagrees with Lippitt is the nature of this purification: a) Lippitt: preferential loves are purified by neighbourly love; b) Krishek: love is purified by a double movement of faith.

## 2. Kierkegaard's two models of love

Krishek [1] points out two problems in *Works of Love*:

1. The claim that neighbourly love is the model for all other loves. This is problematic because there are additional layers in preferential loves that make them different from neighbourly love. According to Krishek, the demand for neighbourly love to be the model for all preferential loves implies that the additional layers are inessential in determining a certain attitude as love or even problematic in the sense that an attitude is no longer love because of them. But, on the other hand, as I have mentioned, it is precisely these additional layers, which are excluded by the demand for modelling preferential loves on neighbourly love, that make preferential loves special or different from neighbourly love. We thus face a problem: we have to either renounce the demand that all preferential loves be modelled on neighbourly love or ascertain that such modelling actually swallows up preferential loves. In this sense, preferential love and neighbourly love can only exist separately and not fused into a unit. We can love something or someone preferentially or in a neighbourly manner, but not in both ways simultaneously. Since it is unrealistic to expect that people can renounce preferential loves, if this even makes sense, the demand for every preferential love to be modelled on neighbourly love turns out to be inappropriate.
2. When Ferreira [2] accepts Kierkegaard's view from *Works of Love* that preferential loves are manifestations of neighbourly love, she tries to preserve the differences between them as differences in the response to the needs of the loved person. As opposed to various emotional attitudes in different forms of preferential love, responsiveness to needs is not problematic in view

of the equality of various forms of love. However, Krishek poses her objection in the form of a question: Is this explanation truly in accordance with our experience? Can I explain the difference between my love for a stranger and my love for my wife merely by taking into account what each of them desires or wants from me? Her answer is negative, for she believes that an important part of explaining the specific differences between different forms of love needs to take into account not only what the loved ones want from me, but also what I need or desire or want from them. However, in *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard is not exactly inclined to such an explanation, says Krishek, which is consistent with his definition of neighbourly love as self-denial: "Christian love is self-denial's love" [1, p. 160]. If neighbourly love, which Kierkegaard believes to be the model for all loves, is understood or defined as based only on self-denial, as indicated by Kierkegaard's identification, then it is not surprising that little space is left for loves that are more than self-denial. This brings us to the second problem that Krishek discovers in *Works of Love*: the dominance, if not even exclusivity, that Kierkegaard, in his understanding of love, ascribes to self-denial.

Here, Krishek explicitly points out that she completely agrees that self-denial is an essential moment of proper love. What she finds problematic is the view that self-denial is the most important element of love as suggested by Kierkegaard. If we want to preserve the legitimacy, significance and meaningfulness of preferential love, then we cannot claim that self-denial is the most central or even the only part of proper love because preferential love demands a step beyond self-denial, it demands self-affirmation. If self-denial demands a shift of attention or focus from oneself to the other, then self-affirmation means a purified return to oneself: "This purification means a renewed way – modest, conscious, and thoughtful – of regarding one's will, desires, and tendencies, and of responding to them. Indeed, denying or renouncing something (in this case, one's self) and *receiving it back* in a renewed and more appropriate form, differs from the model of love that Kierkegaard presents in *Works of Love*. However, this is a Kierkegaardian model nevertheless: the model of *faith*, which he presents in *Fear and Trembling*." [1, p. 161]

According to Krishek [3], the model of faith is interestingly connected with love and can contribute to a satisfactory understanding of it [1]. Krishek thus claims that Kierkegaard's oeuvre offers two ways of understanding and explaining love: 1. with the model of self-denial; 2. with the model of faith.

Kierkegaard claims that a person, if they are to have faith, has to go through a process or a movement of resignation (renouncement). In case of Abraham, the father of faith, the object of his renunciation was his beloved son Isaac. As the essential element of faith, resignation requires that we renounce 'everything', everything we possess, everything that means something to us, everyone we *love*. What does this actually mean? Krishek's answer is this: Human life is more or less 'ephemeral' and finite. This fact casts a certain shadow that extends over practically all our life. Kierkegaardian resignation

means an uncompromising confrontation with this shadow. The knight of resignation comprehends all as in a way lost to them and as something defying any sort of certainty. However, on the other hand, resignation is not a nihilistic or pessimistic position, but a humbling attitude. It means that we are aware that we are not the masters of what is sometimes referred to as 'one's own', but that all we have and will have and all we want belongs to God and is subject to God's will. On the one hand, the knight of resignation passionately desires the object of their renunciation, for example, Isaac, and is therefore deeply saddened by its, actual or potential, loss. However, on the other hand, they admit, without any bitterness or resentfulness, that it is not for them to decide when and who and what will be given or taken away from them [1]. Resignation means a deep understanding that life is first and foremost formed in line with God's will and leads to a wholehearted and complete submission to it. In view of such an understanding of resignation, Krishek suggests understanding faith as the ability to trust the will of God. Such faith enables the believer to find meaning in things deprived of their secure hold. Kierkegaardian faith enables us to live correctly and meaningfully despite losses and temporal limitation or finiteness and despite the fact that at any moment an 'Isaac' can happen to us.

How is all this related to love? The believer's task is to discern what God's will is, what God wants of them, what being they should become. The believer's will must follow and try to shape itself in accordance with God's will as much as possible. This already makes it clear that when it comes to loving in the way of faith, self-affirmation is already included in our relationship with God, which means that purification is *eo ipso* already included. Shaping oneself in accordance with God's will already includes an affirmation of one's endeavours centred on oneself, which Krishek believes to be necessary for preferential loves. In the framework of the faith-like model of love, there is thus no obstacle for the existence of correct and specific preferential loves. Arguing for the model of faith, Krishek proposes a status for neighbourly love that differs from the status of love in the model from *Works of Love* or in Ferreira and Lippitt. She stresses two points [1]:

1. Neighbourly love is not the 'only' and all love although it is an indispensable part of every proper love. She compares it to the ground floor of a house on which very different storeys can be built.
2. It is true that, in the case of love for a homeless person or a stranger, the emotional involvement of the person who loves as well as their tendencies and inclinations do not play a very significant role. Yet, in such a case, too, the lover's emotional involvement goes beyond bare self-denial. For example, in empathy, we experience the pain of the other and can experience satisfaction in thinking we have contributed to their wellbeing. In short, the loving person is also involved in the mentioned 'pure' cases of neighbourly love in a way that exceeds mere self-denial.

Lippitt [4] ascribes to Krishek the view that preferential love and neighbourly love cannot coexist, that they do not allow each other. On the other hand, Lippitt himself argues for the possibility and the reality of the mentioned

coexistence. In order to prove this, he uses the metaphor of God filter: God is a sort of a filter through which each of our loves has to pass. A major component of this filter is that the other is first and foremost the neighbour. This is how Lippitt explains his model [4]. Suppose we have a guest who wants a mixture of orange juice and grapefruit juice, but does not like the bits of fruit contained in the only cartons of such juice that I have at home. I can solve the problem by pouring both the orange juice (preferential love) and the grapefruit juice (neighbourly love) through a filter. Both the grapefruit and the orange juice are contained in the liquid in their 'purified' form in the guest's glass. This liquid is a specific manifestation of preferential love in which the person we preferentially love is simultaneously viewed as my neighbour. On the other hand, Lippitt believes that Krishek's interpretation can be seen to claim that preferential love and neighbourly love are like oil and water. According to Lippitt, Krishek cannot imagine how one could allow the other. Krishek refutes such an interpretation of her view and she does so very convincingly.

Like Krishek, Lippitt posits neighbourly love as a model for proper love. The role of neighbourly love as a filter is to purify the concrete examples of preferential love of any harmful impurities, but without removing the specificities of preferential love since they are the ones that make them manifestation of preferential love. Lippitt offers a solution for the problem that he believes Krishek did not solve. Krishek argues that the latter is not true because she presented a model of faith-like love that allows for the coexistence of preferential and neighbourly love. As I have explained above, Krishek claims that neighbourly love is a fundamental emotional disposition that we have to equally direct at all people. Krishek admits that, in case of non-preferential loves, this 'fundamental love' is actually shaped in accordance with the needs of the respective neighbour, as Ferreira [2, p. 112-113] claims. However, in case of preferential loves, the other layers of emotional and practical dispositions that are unique to such relationships are added to neighbourly love and give preferential loves their distinct nature [1]. Kierkegaard did not object to preferential loves as such, but was primarily interested in how we can love correctly. In this respect, Lippitt claims that every love has to be purified and that then different forms of love can coexist, also neighbourly love and preferential loves. Following *Works of Love*, he suggests the model of God filter. But according to the model of faith-like love, love is purified by the double movement of faith and not by neighbourly love. According to Krishek, this model has two advantages [1]:

1. Contrary to Kierkegaard's inappropriate identification of neighbourly love and self-denial, the model of faith-like love with the double movement of faith ((self)denial and (self)affirmation) leaves room for preferential loves that go beyond self-denial.
2. Kierkegaard's 'demand' for neighbourly love to be equal to everyone (that is, non-exclusive) is justified. But, on the other hand, this is why it cannot serve as a model of preferential loves, which are neither equal nor non-exclusive. Contrary to this, the model of faith-like love does not posit equality as a

special condition for proper love and enables us to understand how preferential loves, which are unequal by their nature, can nevertheless be pure and therefore true loves. Forming love in the image of faith thus takes into account the need of acknowledging the importance of the essential characteristics of preferential love: exclusiveness and self-affirmation. Such an alternative model can be discerned between the lines in *Fear and Trembling*, which, regardless of all else, nevertheless pronouncedly foregrounds the greatness of preferential loves, for example, a father's love for his son, thereby not pushing them to the margin, but, quite the opposite, in a way putting (the manifestation of) preferential love in the centre.

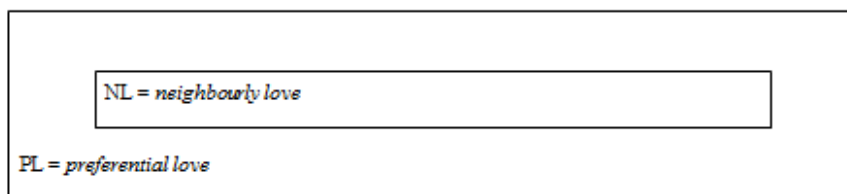
### **3. The advantages of the faith-like model - not only self-denial but also self-affirmation (becoming God's image)**

The essence of love – in the sense of *agapē* – is service. But the question is who do we ultimately serve? Within the model of faith-like love, this is quite clear: God. But serving God already implies that we not only renounce, disavow, deny, forsake, but also develop, establish and nurture preferential loves, which are by nature unequal and exclusive, etc. All these exclusive, preferential, self-affirming, etc. things are needed if we want to become (special, unique) beings that God wants us to become. The supreme criterion of proper love is not self-denial and equality to all but love for God, which consists in a consistent and unconditional observing of his will and therefore his desire about what we should be like and who we should become. In the faith-like model of love, this is quite clear and emphasised, which is why I find it appropriate. In addition, it is in line with Kierkegaard's attitude, which permeates his entire oeuvre including *Works of Love*, that faith is the foundation of all good and that without faith proper love is not possible. At the same time, such a view on the question of proper love frees us of the unnecessary and sometimes outright harmful bad conscience due to the preferential, unequal and self-affirmative sides of our life. In a certain sense, however, Christian truth is the exact opposite, which turns out to be the case when we consider Kirkegaard's works: not only the nurturing but also the neglecting of preferential inequalities and self-affirmative aspects of our life can be wrong, can be a sin, that is: something that is opposed to God's will. This reminds me of an anecdote from the life of the great Italian tenor Beniamino Gigli, who once asked a collocutor if he thought it right that he practices, sings and studies all day long while many people toil and still hardly make ends meet. He received the following answer: 'Do you have so little appreciation for God, who gave you your immense singing talent?' The model of faith-like love is also in accordance with the Christian view that martyrdom cannot be forced [5]. Here, too, one needs to be humble, 'down-to-earth' and respectful of God's will. Furthermore, the model of faith-like love is in accord with the personalistic view and the attitude of virtue ethics, which foregrounds persons and their flourishing, and not a principle or a rule: the essential question is what kind of a person we have to be or become and not which principle is

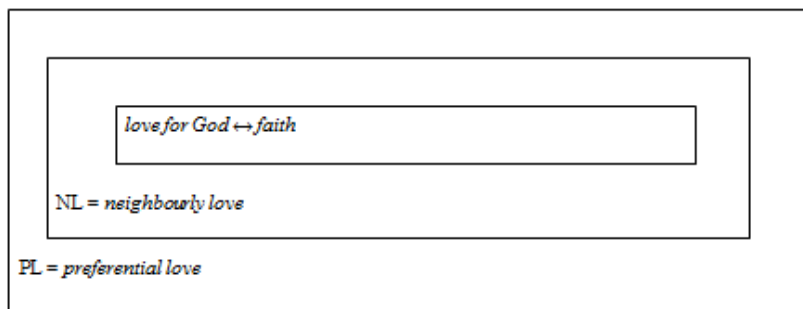
correct. However, on account of the idea of equality and self-denial, we must by no means destroy the development of individuals into different single individuals. What God wants is first and foremost that we become what he has intended us to become. Self-denial and neighbourly love is not the goal, but the means of becoming what God wants. Becoming a means is inappropriate both from the viewpoint of God's will and the realistic view of life. God has given us a determinate and unique image and our main and actually our only task is to realise it. In order for us to be aware of this, live accordingly and advance in getting to know the image assigned to us, we need faith. Life originating in other beliefs and values is not in accordance with God's will. This is why the following, which is something that Kierkegaard also pointed out in *Works of Love*, holds true: "Everything that does not come from faith is sin" (Romans 14.23) We come to the same point – that the supreme criterion is adhering to God's will – in trying to understand violence. Following Kierkegaard, Charles Bellinger [6-10] found that violence starts with the resistance to the possibility of spiritual growth, which is to say the avoidance or even opposition to God's will and the avoidance of contact with God. Violence originates in the alienation from God.

#### **4. Kierkegaard and Brentano**

The ontological model for the structure of the acts of proper love can be found in Brentano's theory of substance and accident [11-14], according to which the substance is the only proper part of the accident. The proper part is – by definition – not identical with the whole, which is why the claim that something is the only proper part of a whole is in a way paradoxical. According to Brentano, substance and accident are (numerically) not two things, but they are not identical. Brentano writes that accident is a sort of an enrichment (German *Bereicherung*) of substance. An example of a substance is a soul, while its (psychological) states are its accidents. Such a theory enables, for example, the explanation of a person's identity (unity) (through time), despite their different psychological states or changes. Brentano's theory by no means belittles the specificity and significance of various psychological states, but at the same time directs our attention to their foundation and necessary condition. The Brentanian model enables a reasonable interpretation of Kierkegaard's propositions about neighbourly love, preferential love and the relations between them. On the one hand, Kierkegaard claims that there is no other love except neighbourly love. On the other hand, the denial of all preferential loves as improper is absurd. Such a Brentanian interpretation is in accordance with Krishek's metaphor about neighbourly love as a ground floor and preferential love as a storey. We can further develop this thought: the substance of every proper love is not neighbourly love but love for God, which does not exist without faith. Faith and love for God are logically equivalent. This is why an integral graphic presentation of proper love is not Figure 1 ... but... Figure 2.



**Figure 1.** Proper love – incomplete presentation.



**Figure 2.** Proper love – integral presentation.

That *Kjerlighed* is the substance of every love is something that Ferreira also agrees with: “God’s love [*Kjerlighed*] for us is the energy through which we love; it is the substance of love in any form” [15].

In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard (most comprehensively) develops the thesis that love is one and at the same time multiple. Ferreira thusly explains his view:

“*Kjerlighed* is the immediate love by which we are loved by God and which enables us to love others – that is, Kierkegaard uses the same Danish word [*Kjerlighed*] to refer to God as Love, to the love placed in us by God, as well as to the love for neighbour we are commanded to express. *Kjerlighed* is thus prior to any distinction between erotic love and non-erotic love. So, if erotic love, friendship, and neighbour love are kinds of caring that we humans experience, and there is only one source of love in us, then love is one yet many.

To make this point in another way, we should note that the most basic distinction Kierkegaard makes is the difference between *Kjerlighed* and *Forkjerlighed* – that is, between non-preferential love and preferential love /.../ The common core of the two words is crucial in revealing the unity of love – *Kjerlighed* is, one could say, the (linguistic) substance of *Forkjerlighed*, but in *Forkjerlighed* the caring is qualified, focused, directed, centred on specific others with qualities we like.” [15, p. 336]

## 5. Love your neighbour as yourself - neither more nor less

According to Kierkegaard, we must not love our neighbour either more or less than ourselves [15, p. 340]. We must not do anything that would distance us



from becoming the image God intended for us. Such action, even if it is 'love', is irresponsible. Ferreira says that *Works of Love* distinguish "love that is a feeling of attraction or inclination from love that is best construed as a kind of responsibility for compassionate caring. Such responsibility is at the same time a debt to others that should be offered to them as a gift directed to their welfare." [15, p. 341] Also in accordance with this is the Christian doctrine that martyrdom cannot or must not be forced [5]. If God had not intended the 'image' of a martyr for us, then it is not right if we try to go down this path. We could say that no matter how much we 'love' the other, we must never become merely a means for their wellbeing. That is wrong. On the other hand, the other must never become merely a means for us, no matter how much we 'love' or 'need' them. In other words, in every relation and therefore in every love, we must take care that we respect the other's dignity. This is in accordance with Kierkegaard's emphasis on the significance of how, in what way we give or show love for the other: "Kierkegaard reveals an incredible sensitivity to the ways in which we express our compassionate caring, claiming that the way to love is to give the gift as if it were the recipient's own property" [15, p. 341]. We must therefore also forgive in a way that does not humiliate the other, warns Kierkegaard [15, p. 340]. In line with the above, Ferreira writes: "The point of *Works of Love* is to shock us into realising two things. First /.../ that even when we have no inclination or attraction at all to someone, and even if they hate us, or resist or reject our love, we must preserve the love that respects the dignity and equality of each individual. Second /.../ even in erotic love and friendship we must preserve the love that respects the dignity and equality of each individual." [15, p. 341]

To love someone, according to Kierkegaard, means to endeavour for their wellbeing and contribute to it. But what is one's wellbeing? Kierkegaard says two things about this: 1. To love God as much as possible; 2. To become one's own, oneself, free, independent, one's own master, to stand alone [16].

"Insofar as the loving one is able, he seeks to encourage a person to become himself, to become his own master." [16, p. 278] Someone can be themselves, their own master, etc., only insofar as they love God and vice versa: only insofar as they are themselves, do they actually realise the love for God. This is also in accord with the essential moment of Kierkegaard's view on love, his belief that all love originates in God [17]. It is impossible to follow God's will if we are not in contact with God, and this following is precisely love. We can conclude that, according to Kierkegaard, love is always directed to what people have to be or become [18]. The one who loves gives the loved one what helps the latter to become the image God intended for them, to become God's image. This image that God intended for us is a gift, a gift of infinite divine love. In this context, it is not surprising that Kierkegaard thought that every love, regardless of its form, is possible only because we are infinitely loved [19, 20]. As he wrote in his diaries: "It is like a child's giving his parents a present, purchased however, with what the child has received from his parents" [15, p. 342].

## 6. Ethics as a realistic view and love for a person as a path to their betterment

Ethics is a way of seeing. To be ethical means to see the other as I actually see them in their concreteness [2, p. 106]. According to Kierkegaard, we can preserve this concreteness in various ways. But we must by all means strive towards two things [4]: firstly, not to become victims of our own fantasies. We must love the person as we actually see them, and not the image of them that we have ourselves produced [16, p. 164]. Secondly, to love a person as we see them does not mean we are blind to their faults. Love can be a challenge, but it can only be a challenge if we love the person as we see them. In this context, Ferreira points out Jesus's relation to Peter (just before he denied Jesus), which Kierkegaard noticed. Jesus does not think: Peter first has to change and then I will love him (again). No. His attitude is this: Peter is Peter, and my love, if anything, will help him to become a better person [16, p. 172]. For Christians, then, (their) love is not (merely) a matter of attraction (erotic or romantic love) nor merely an award for the ethicalness of the beloved, but first and foremost service: I love the other in order to help them become another or a better person. Christians believe that if there is anything that can help others and ourselves become better or other people, it is our love. This viewpoint can also be related to Jesus's commandment to love our enemies. What credit do we have if we love only those who attract us, who do us good, who are our friends or are (already) moral, good. According to Christianity, this is not just, for love belongs to all, everyone deserves love. Love belongs to everyone gratuitously. Since love is not a matter of justness, respect, merit, pleasure, etc., but serving with the intention of bettering the loved person, which is why it (can) also be a commandment since it makes sense in the Christian horizon for us to strive for others to become other or better persons. But if this is not commanded – that we have to strive for others to become better persons – or if it is not believed that this can be achieved with love, then love as a commandment is also nonsensical. Furthermore, as Ferreira points out: if God's love has to be a model for proper human love, then this implies that both have to focus on "concrete differences" [2, p. 112; 4]. She refers us to the following passage in *Works of Love*: "With what infinite love nature or God in nature encompasses all the diverse things that have life and existence! Just recollect what you yourself have so often delighted in looking at, recollect the beauty of the meadows! There is no difference in the love, no, none – yet what a difference in the flowers! Even the least ... flower disregarded by even its immediate surroundings, the flower you can hardly find without looking carefully – it is as if this, too, had said to love: Let me become something in myself, something distinctive. And then love has helped it to become its own distinctiveness, but far more beautiful than the poor little flower had ever dared to hope for. What love! First, it makes no distinction, none at all; next ... it infinitely distinguishes itself in loving the diverse. Wondrous love! For what is as difficult as to make no distinction at all in loving, and if one makes no distinction at all, what is as difficult as making distinctions!" [16, p. 269–270]

As Pia Søltoft, following Kierkegaard, pointed out, to love is to be one with oneself [21]. Our highest possible achievement is that we develop our single individuality, our authentic uniqueness. This is the most what one can 'get'. But at the same time this is the most what one can give or offer. As Milbank has pointed out - when explaining the view which Valčo called "agape personalism" [22] - love is always 'personal' and 'singular' also regarding the giving, not just receiving: "the highest thing which all can offer is now nothing general to which they should aspire; it is instead simply their given *real selves*, their own uniqueness, which is inseparable from their unique set of relations to others" [22, p. 98].

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