Love's *Telos*:
Kierkegaard's Critique of Preferential Love

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Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* is often associated with a harshly dismissive stance toward ordinary human love, as measured against an ascetic ideal of pure, Christian, non-preferential love. Despite a number of recent attempts to give it a sympathetic hearing, the worry persists that this text denigrates most of what we ordinarily call 'love' in ways that are extreme and implausible. The worry has been expressed pointedly by Knud Løgstrup:

> *Works of Love* is a brilliantly thought out system of safeguards against being forced into a close relationship with other people … In Kierkegaard it is self-denial that makes up the content of the love of one's neighbour and differentiates it from passionate love … It is thus something like a grotesque coincidence that that relationship to the other person which is defined by passion and the relationship to one's neighbour have the same name. (Løgstrup 1997, pp. 232-3)

My own view is that, on the standard reading of *Works of Love*, which I shall call the moralizing reading, this sort of complaint cannot be answered adequately. However, I believe that the moralizing reading misrepresents the overall structure of Kierkegaard's critique and obscures its internal character. My main aim in this paper is to clarify the structure of Kierkegaard's argument and to develop an alternative interpretative framework. While I shall not try to offer a full defence of the standpoint of *Works of Love*, I do hope to indicate why stock criticisms miss their target and how this text offers a cogent overall contribution to the philosophy of love.

§1 *Kierkegaard's case against preferential love: the moralizing reading*

On the standard reading, Kierkegaard's core view might be summarized by the following claim: *ordinary kinds of human love, conceived as species of preferential love, are morally inferior when measured against the ideal kind of love.* In this view, our ordinary

human loves—our friendships, romances, familial loves—are rooted in our preferences in a way that makes them, *en masse*, morally inferior to neighbourly love. As Sharon Krishek puts it:

> Given the moral value and praiseworthiness of neighbourly love, what is the status of preferential loves such as romantic love and friendship? In his major work on love, *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard clearly and robustly affirms the moral superiority of the former, and approves the latter on one condition: that it serve as an instance of neighbourly love. (Krishek 2014, p. 156)

Neighbourly love is the undiscriminating kind of love that Kierkegaard associates with Jesus' command to love your neighbour as yourself and with the Samaritan who, in the parable, shows uncalculating generosity to a wounded Jewish stranger. It is when they are measured against this moral standard that ordinary kinds of human love are found badly wanting.

More specifically, our ordinary loves face the following litany of charges:

(i) *They are selfish*. We love only according to our own preferences in ways which prioritize care for ourselves over care for others.

(ii) *They are inattentive*. We attend only selectively to the good of those we love, as mediated by our own preferences.

(iii) *They are self-deceptive*. We seem to ourselves to be wholly other-regarding even while our loves are really selfish and selectively inattentive.

(iv) *They are exclusionary*. Our loves exclude others—'other others'—from their orbits.

(v) *They are conformist*. Our loves are shaped by conformity to given recognition orders, i.e. the structures and hierarchies through which individuals are confirmed in various social positions and roles.

(vi) *They are ephemeral*. Our loves are hostage to change, atrophy, human mortality.

Considered in the round, moralizing readers interpret this case against preferential love as an *external* critique. That is, we are to suppose that Kierkegaard assumes in the reader a prior commitment to the moral authority of Christianity and then proceeds on this basis to unmask the morally ugly side to what we often take to be among the most precious and ennobling aspects of our lives.

This way of presenting the overall structure of Kierkegaard's argument—the standard, moralizing reading—might be captured as follows:

1. Christianity is morally authoritative.
2. Christianity places us under a moral requirement to show non-preferential love.
3. Our ordinary loves fall far short of this requirement in various ways. They are selfish, inattentive, self-deceptive, etc.

   So, our ordinary loves fall far short of what is morally required.

On this reconstruction, premise 1 is presupposed. But *Works of Love* marshals various arguments for its conditional conclusion by defending 2 and 3.

I want next to explain why I think we should resist the moralizing reading. To be clear, there is much that this reading gets right. It is plainly true that Kierkegaard regards neighbourly, non-preferential love as ideal love. And it is true that *Works of Love* advances this litany of charges, (i-vi), against most of what we ordinarily call 'love'. But what I want to show is that the moralizing reading systematically distorts this critique in a twofold way: by casting it in primarily moral and deontic terms; and by presenting its overall argumentative structure on the model of an external critique.

§II *A case against the moralizing reading*

One reason to resist the moralizing reading is an argument 'from charity'. In short, this reading renders Kierkegaard's critique dogmatic, one-sided, and rhetorically overblown.

For, consider again the litany of charges ((i)-(vi) above). What do these ways of describing our ordinary loves really come to? Minus the loaded rhetoric, the view that emerges from these descriptions *might* be recast in a way that looks far more sympathetic to our ordinary loves: namely, as saying that these loves reflect who we are in the world and what we care about as mortals. Now, some will be skeptical about the very idea that there might be love of any other kind than this. Even granted its possibility, however, why suppose that a purely non-preferential kind of love would be morally superior to the ordinary kind? Might not the two be on at least an equal moral footing? Might there not even be a case for the superiority of ways of loving that do not abstract from who we are in the world and what we care about as mortals? The moralizing reading leaves these crucial questions hanging.

Let me articulate this worry in a little more detail. About Kierkegaard's charges against our ordinary human loves, on the moralizing reading, we can and should ask where exactly the moral fault is supposed to lie. For example: what's so bad about being 'selfish'? (Likewise: what's so bad about loves that exclude other others? Where's the moral problem with loves that are fleeting?) 'Selfish' certainly sounds like a term of moral censure. But it is important to take into account here the peculiarity of Kierkegaard's idea of 'selfishness'. This term, 'selfish' ('selviske'), is nowhere directly defined in *Works of Love*. But it is very closely associated with two others: 'preferential love' ('Forkjerligheden') and 'self-love' ('Selvkjerligheden'). To help fix ideas, I suggest the following gloss:

> Love is 'selfish', in Kierkegaard's sense, just in case it is preference-relative, i.e. *X loves Y relative to X's predispositions to favour {F, G …} in Y.*

In Kierkegaard's own terms, love is selfish just in case preferential love is the 'middle term' between lover and beloved so that their relationship is thoroughly mediated and circumscribed by what the lover is predisposed to favour. We should be careful not to be misled here by the English word, 'preference'. In Kierkegaard's usage, our preferences are not to be identified with our deliberate choices or reflectively endorsed value-judgements or determinate desires. Rather, they are our pre-reflective affective orientations to the world, shaping horizons of value and significance for us: our proclivities, inclinations, biases, drives. Our loves are preference-relative, in this sense, just in case those we love manifest themselves to us as loveable only as primed by these underlying affective orientations.

Why then does Kierkegaard suppose that preference-relative love is selfish? His idea is that what is selfish is letting others matter to us solely in preference-relative ways. His paradigm contrast-case here is of course the Samaritan in Jesus' parable. Kierkegaard emphasizes that, in the socio-political context of this parable, including the rivalry between Jewish and Samaritan religious traditions, this Samaritan would have been especially predisposed *not* to help a wounded Jewish stranger.[1] In Kierkegaard's view, his refusal to let the saliences of the situation be prejudiced by such predispositions is part and parcel of what makes the Good Samaritan good, what makes his love unselfish.

Kierkegaard's claim is then that, by default, our ordinary loves—our friendships and romances, for example—are preference-relative in this sense and therefore selfish. He writes:

> In erotic love and friendship, the two love each other by virtue of the dissimilarity or by virtue of the similarity that is based on dissimilarity (as when two friends love each other by virtue of similar customs, characters, occupations, education, etc., that is, on the basis of the similarity by which they are different from other people, or in which they are like each other as different from other people). Therefore the two can become one self in a selfish sense. (Kierkegaard 1995 [1847], p. 56)

The thought here is that we are primed to favour *distinguishing* features of those we love: whether these features are salient and attractive to us as distinguishing those we love from everyone else or as distinguishing us together from everyone else. Either way, Kierkegaard posits that preference-relative love is therefore selfish in this further sense: not only does it circumscribe how others matter but it *assimilates* others to oneself. He evidently holds that our pre-reflective orientation toward other humans is determined quite generally by a drive to assimilate some of these others to ourselves, based on their distinguishing features and as a means to define ourselves against the rest. On the supposition that they are preference-relative, he therefore concludes that even our most intimate unions are selfish.

Two points underline just how easy it is for our loves to come out as 'selfish' under this conception. Firstly, we should not assume that the selfish lover, under this conception, is unable to make fine-grained discriminations across persons. This point is worth emphasizing. For, consider an immediate objection to the claim that our ordinary loves are preference-relative and so 'selfish' in Kierkegaard's sense. If X's love for Y is preferential then it is based in certain privileged features of Y. This implies that if another person, Z, shares these same features, then X will have a subjective reason to love Z that is no weaker than his reason to love Y. But consider for example a standard case of romantic love. While it might be true that their features help to explain what attracts the lovers, at the causal level, this surely cannot be all there is to their love. For, each would protest that their beloved is quite unique and irreplaceable. And the exclusive character of their mutual love would seem to bear this out.

However, Kierkegaard can certainly allow that the predispositions that guide preference-relative love are sensitive to variation across individuals in fine-grained ways. Indeed, as we have just seen, he strongly emphasizes the exclusive character of our ordinary loves. Parents dote on their own offspring; lovers fill each other's horizons; friends define themselves against outsiders. Moreover, much turns here on how we interpret the idea of X's loving '{F, G …} in Y'. In one approach, there are these two separate entities, the individual,

Y, and the features instantiated by Y, where X's love latches onto a subset of these features *rather than* the individual herself. But we need not adopt this dualistic interpretation. We might instead think of the features loved by X as inseparably 'in' Y, rather as we think of the features of a face as 'in' the face.[2] This allows that two individuals could share certain features but each express these quite differently, perhaps uniquely. So interpreted, preferential love might well latch onto features in others not *in abstracto* but as concrete expressions of their individuality.

Furthermore, what counts as 'selfish' here includes responses to others that it would be natural to describe instead as highly altruistic. To be sure, Kierkegaard's 'selfishness' does not exactly contrast with 'altruism' if the latter means putting others' interests before one's own. On the contrary, he makes much of the 'as yourself' part of the command to love your neighbour as yourself. In Kierkegaard's idea of neighbourly love, the contrast with selfishness is instead strict equality of care, for the good of the beloved as for one's own, where such care is not preference-relative. In this view, the test for selfish love is not whether you put the other's interests before your own but whether you care for him or her only in the ways circumscribed by what you happen to find attractive in him or her.

Nonetheless, we should not miss how this approach leads Kierkegaard to call 'selfish' attitudes and actions that we might more naturally regard as altruistic. In this approach, you could make sacrifices for a loved one, even very great sacrifices—and still your love comes out as 'selfish'. Consider for example the case of a parent who makes significant sacrifices for the sake of her son or daughter. In Kierkegaard's usage, it is enough for such expressions of parental love to count as 'selfish' if they express only the natural affections and inclinations of parenthood.[3] This should give us pause when considering the inference, 'selfish, so morally wrong'.[4] The following seems a reasonable reaction to the type of example just envisaged: call it 'selfish' if you like, but there's nothing morally wrong with preferential parental love all the same! Again, why denigrate those loves which reflect who we are in the world and what we care about as mortals?

Now, it remains open at this point for friends of moralizing to fall back on the appeal to the moral authority of Christianity. If Kierkegaard shows that our preferential loves are as such morally suspect, *from this standpoint*, then that is a significant result within Christian ethics. Plainly, however, this would be to render his critique of our ordinary loves such that it could have little or no purchase for any who do not already share its external standpoint, i.e. Christianity—and a specifically Lutheran vision of Christianity to boot.[5] Now, it may be that the probative force of *Works of Love* turns out to be narrowly restricted in this way. But if

there is an otherwise defensible way of interpreting this text which does not have this consequence, this would surely count in its favour.[6]

Arguments from charity have their limitations. For all we have shown so far, the moralizing reading may be right—and our case against it, a case against Kierkegaard. Indeed, moved by some of the concerns just raised, even its most sympathetic readers typically row back on many of the claims in *Works of Love.*[7] Besides this argument from charity, however, there are two major further reasons to resist the moralizing reading.

Firstly, this reading makes it difficult to explain one of the most important claims Kierkegaard *does* make in this text. It makes it difficult to explain, namely, his claim that Christianity recognizes only one kind of love. He writes:

> The worldly or merely human point of view recognizes a great many kinds of love and is well informed about the dissimilarity of each one and the dissimilarity between each particular one and the others …With Christianity the opposite is the case. It recognizes really only one kind of love, the spirit's love, and does not concern itself much with working out in detail the different ways in which this fundamental universal love can manifest itself. Christianly, the entire distinction between the different kinds of love is essentially abolished. (Kierkegaard 1995 [1847], p. 143)

The difficulty here is that moralizing readers typically rely on the idea of an evaluative comparison between *two kinds* of love, preferential and non-preferential respectively (where friendship and romantic love, for example, are conceived as species of the preferential kind). This approach appears to be incompatible with the passage just cited.

Admittedly, Kierkegaard's claim that there is only one kind of love *can* be incorporated into the moralizing reading—but only at the cost of attributing to him the denial that most of what we ordinarily call 'love' is *any* kind of love at all. It is one thing to say that preferential love is of a morally inferior kind, another to deny that so-called preferential 'love' has any share in love whatsoever. Setting aside the point that it only intensifies the worries behind our argument from charity, however, this is not a natural way to interpret Kierkegaard's claim that there is but one kind of love. After all, he continues to refer quite liberally to 'preferential love', 'selfish self-love', 'romantic love' and so forth. More importantly, there is a different, more natural and plausible, way to understand the claim: namely, as saying that non-preferential love is true love, preferential love is *would-be* love.

So, you try to bake a cake, but it fails to rise, and you are left with a stodgy lump. Admittedly, you might try to dress it up as a hitherto undiscovered kind of cake. But the truth is: it's a sorry excuse for a cake. This, on a plausible reading of *Works of Love*, is how what we ordinarily call 'love', i.e. preference-relative love, stands in relation to the real thing, true love. This raises a question that the moralizing reading occludes: what is it about preferential love that makes it would-be love rather than true love?

Attending to a final reason to resist the moralizing reading will help us toward an answer to this question. This is the way the idea of an evaluative comparison between (putative) kinds of love, with respect to their moral status, obscures an important dimension of Kierkegaard's critique. For he presses a more radical charge than that our ordinary loves fall short of an independently given moral requirement. The deeper charge is that preference-relative love is in contradiction with itself. Consider, for example, the following:

> [T]he beloved and the friend are called, remarkably and profoundly, to be sure, the *other self*, *the other I* … Would not self-love then also start loving the other I, the other self? One really does not need to be any great judge of human nature in order with the help of this clue to make discoveries about erotic love and friendship that are alarming to others and humiliating to oneself … But how can devotion and unlimited giving of oneself be self-love? Indeed, when it is devotion to the other I, the other self. (Kierkegaard 1995 [1847], pp. 53-4)

Such passages reveal what I think is Kierkegaard's governing conception of our preferential loves. In this conception, these loves are frustrated and self-undermining. On the one hand, as we have seen, when they are strictly preference-relative, they wind up only promoting our drive for self-expansion. In Murdoch's choice phrase, they only further feed the 'fat relentless ego' (1970, p. 52). On the other hand, however, this is not as it were what our preferential loves *want* to do. On the contrary, it is clearly also part of Kierkegaard's view that, *qua* would-be love, what our preferential loves *aim* for is 'devotion and unlimited giving of oneself'. In a word, our ordinary loves aim to be *self-giving*. In this sense, these loves subvert their own aims. In our very strivings to give ourselves to the one we love, as the *other* self, we wind up assimilating him or her to ourselves, as the other *self*. Aiming to be self-giving, we find ourselves being self-serving.

Much in *Works of Love* can be read as a phenomenology of this predicament, exploring this fundamental tension within our ordinary loves, as it were from the inside.[8]

Notably, the characteristic tone and mood of Kierkegaard's writing in this respect is one of frustrated longing and confession: the longing to be able truly to give oneself in love and the confession that even one's glittering virtues in this regard may turn out to be disguised vices. None of this bathos is well captured by readings in which Kierkegaard is supposed simply to take the moral high ground with respect to what we ordinarily call 'love'.

In sum, the moralizing reading renders Kierkegaard's critique dialectically weak and obscures some of its key features. Building more positively on these points, my aim in what remains of this paper is to advance an alternative account of this critique. My claim will be that it is best understood as an internal critique.

§III *The internal character of Kierkegaard's critique: an alternative to moralizing*

As an alternative to the moralizing reading, I propose the following reconstruction of Kierkegaard's critique:

1. All love aims to be self-giving.
2. Our ordinary loves aim to be self-giving. [from 1]
3. By default, our ordinary loves are preference-relative.
4. Preference-relative love is constitutively selfish, inattentive, self-deceptive etc.
5. The aim to be self-giving is undermined by comportment that is constitutively selfish, inattentive, self-deceptive etc.

   So, by default, our ordinary loves are self-undermining.

Let me say something about each of these premises in turn.

The first point to make about the first premise is that it relies on a perfectly general conception of love (recall Kierkegaard's reference to 'fundamental universal love' in the passage cited above (1995 [1847], p. 143). This conception, moreover, is plainly *teleological*. Dwelling on a phrase in 1 Corinthians 13, according to which love 'seeks not its own', Kierkegaard writes:

> Love does not seek its own, for there are no mine and yours in love. But "mine" and "yours" are only relational specifications of "one's own"; thus, if there are no mine and yours, there is no "one's own" either. But if there is no "one's own" at all, then it is of course impossible to seek one's own. (Kierkegaard 1995 [1847], p. 265)

Thus, Kierkegaard conceives of love as seeking the very opposite of 'selfish self-love'. In opposition to any tendency a person may have to assimilate others to what she can call 'mine', true love seeks a condition of non-possessive mutuality in which lovers give themselves to each other, even to the point of a complete breakdown of 'mine' and 'yours'.

Recognizing that it advances this teleological view of love allows us to place *Works of Love* within a broader tradition in the philosophy of love. This is the tradition in which love is associated in general with the overcoming of egocentrism, self-enclosure, *incurvatus in se*, 'the dear self'. We could think of his conception of love's *telos* as Kierkegaard's take on what Robert Musil called 'The Other Condition', for example, or what Aldous Huxley called 'upwards self-transcendence'; or what F. H. Bradley called 'love in absolute reality'. However, we should be clear that, for Kierkegaard, love's *telos* is not literally *self-less-ness*. With a view to the command to love your neighbour 'as yourself', he insists that aiming to be self-giving is fully consonant with 'proper self-love'. Rather than literal selflessness, what love requires is a radical reorientation of the self, away from being one-sidedly in the thrall of its own preferences. As we might put it, the self needs to become *decentred*: that is, such that it no longer puts itself at the centre of what it cares for.[9] Kierkegaard puts the point strikingly: of loving the neighbour and proper self-love, he says that 'fundamentally they are one the same thing' (1995 [1847], p. 22). He means, I take it, that proper self-love just is the decentred perspective in which I care for myself as your neighbour just as I care for you as mine.[10]

Turning to premise 2, this may look to be in some tension with premise 3. For, the following inference may still seem hard to resist: if it is true that our ordinary loves are, by default, preference-relative, then, in this default condition, our ordinary loves cannot so much as *aim* to be self-giving. This inference is effectively blocked, however, by Kierkegaard's conception of what he calls 'the paradox of love'. This conception is introduced in the following lines from *Philosophical Crumbs*:

> Thus it is also with the paradox of romantic love. The individual lives unperturbed, sufficient unto himself, but then the paradox of self-love is awakened through the love of another, the one desired.…The lover is changed by this paradox of love, so that he hardly recognizes himself … Self-love lies at the foundation of love, but the height of its paradoxical passion is precisely to will its own downfall. This is also what love desires, and thus these two forces understand each other in the moment of passion, and this passion

> is precisely love. …Thus it is with the passion of romantic love. Self-love has indeed been conquered. Despite this, however, it is not destroyed, but rather taken hostage, and is romantic love's *spolia opima*. It can come to life again though, and this is the temptation of romantic love. (Kierkegaard 2009 [1843], pp. 112, 120)

The paradox of love, then, is this: that what presents itself to the person in love as in her own interests turns out to be a condition in which what presents itself as in own interests is no longer at the centre of what she cares for. From this perspective, while it originates from selfish self-love, *eros* aims for its collapse ('self-love wills its own downfall'). In this respect, moreover, *eros* shares in what 'love desires' quite generally. But, while lovers in the throes of erotic passion may for a while experience a kind of disorientation which approximates to this decentred perspective—as reflected in our idioms about lovers 'falling', being 'head over heals', 'swept off their feet' and so forth--there remains within such love the ever-present danger of collapsing back into selfish self-love. This is 'the temptation of romantic love'.

For my argument in this paper, what is of crucial importance here is that, with respect to love's telos, there is no *a priori* difference between the loves shown by the Good Samaritan and, say, Isolde when she sings: 'You Isolde / Tristan I / no longer Isolde' (Act II Scene II). In principle, *eros* and *agape* equally have a share in love's essence, that is, its *telos*.[11] The decisive differences only really emerge if we suppose that Isolde's preferential love for Tristan is preference-*relative*. For then, as we have seen, Kierkegaard thinks we should allow only that hers is a would-be love, constitutively frustrated and self-defeating. (I shall shortly explain why preferential love need not be preference-relative.)

Regarding premise 3, we can usefully compare the following variations:

3* *Naturally and spontaneously*, our ordinary loves are preference-relative

3** *Essentially*, our ordinary loves are preference-relative

It is safe to attribute to Kierkegaard 3*.[12] This is how he conceives of our preferential loves in their default condition: i.e. as they spontaneously arise within us, according to our drives and inclinations. But it is worth noting that 3* is stronger than 3 and is not strictly needed for the main line of argument to go through. Løgstrup, for example, has objections to 3* that are not also objections to 3. Roughly, he objects that preference-relative love is already a distortion of the natural love which spontaneously flows from our interdependence as human

beings.[13] In my judgement, Kierkegaard's darker view of what comes naturally to human beings is eminently defensible against this line of objection. For his part, however, Løgstrup anyway agrees that, once they are modified through various forms of reflection, our ordinary loves then lose their innocence and default to a selfish mode. His objection on this score could therefore be granted for the sake of argument.

By contrast, it is certainly unsafe to attribute to Kierkegaard 3**. Contrary to this claim, he evidently thinks our preferential loves admit of becoming otherwise than preference-relative. 'In erotic love and friendship', he admonishes, 'preserve love for the neighbor' (1995 [1847], p. 62). I shall turn shortly to the question of how he thinks we can heed this admonition. But to see how he can allow for this possibility at all, it is salutary that premise 4 makes a claim specifically about preference-*relative* love. This is important because of an ambiguity in his term, 'preferential love' ('Forkjerlighedens'). This could mean (i) preference-*involving* love, i.e. love that is formed and sustained *inter alia* through our preferences; or it could mean (ii) preference-*relative* love*,* in the sense explained above. Though I do not believe he trades on the ambiguity, it is unfortunate that Kierkegaard did not make the distinction explicit. For, this has led to the confusing impression that he thinks our ordinary loves are constitutively preference-relative and that preference-relative loves are constitutively selfish and so, by transitivity, that our ordinary loves are constitutively selfish. Hence, the mistaken idea that he endorses 3** above.

On the reading I am proposing, premise 5 is at the heart of Kierkegaard's critique. This premise captures the real issue with 'selfishness': not that our ordinary loves fall short of an independently given moral requirement but that they undermine love's *telos*. The worry is that, *qua* preference-relative, our ordinary loves militate against the decentred condition that, *qua* love, they always also implicitly strive toward. Likewise, with respect to the charge that our loves are inattentive. The real worry here is that attending to those we love only in ways circumscribed by our own preferences keeps us wrapped up in ourselves. This comes out nicely in such passages as the following:

> With what infinite love nature or God in nature encompasses all the diverse things that have life and existence! … Even the least, the most insignificant, the most unimpressive, the poor little 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… Just suppose nature were like us human beings—rigid, domineering, cold, partisan, small-minded, capricious—and imagine, yes,

> just imagine what would happen to the beauty of the meadow! So it is also in the relationships of love among human beings; only true love loves every human being according to the person's distinctiveness. The rigid, the domineering person lacks flexibility, lacks the pliability to comprehend others; he demands his own from everyone, wants everyone to be transformed in his image, to be trimmed according to his pattern for human beings…." (Kierkegaard 1995 [1847], pp. 269-270)

The problem with the domineering person—the one who imposes his will on those he purports to love, assuming he knows what it is best for them—is that the good of the beloved shows up to him rigidly within the horizon of what is made salient for him by own underlying orientation to the world. He lacks the flexibility to attend to the beloved in a decentred way, according to his or her own distinctive individuality.

We can make parallel points about Kierkegaard's other complaints about our ordinary loves in their default condition. Consider again the charge that these loves are exclusionary, for example. It should by now be clear that the problem here is that their preference-relativity means that, instead of being self-giving, these loves can only lead us into assimilating self-expansion. To be sure, such unions may lead us to say 'ours' instead of 'mine', but, as Kierkegaard observes, here 'ours' really only functions as a modification of 'mine' (1995 [1847], pp. 265). Likewise, his claim is not, for example, that our loves are morally bad *qua* ephemeral. The issue is that, *qua* ephemeral, they leave the self in a state of restless self-absorption and so undermine love's *telos*.[14]

Interpreted in this way, as an internal critique, the upshot of Kierkegaard's argument can be stated clearly. The upshot is that our ordinary loves need to be transformed so that, while they may continue to be formed and sustained partly through our preferences, they are no longer preference-relative. To reiterate, he does not conclude that our ordinary loves need to be *replaced* by kinds of love that are in no wise preference-involving. Rather, he concludes that our ordinary loves need to be *reoriented* toward their inner *telos*.[1] *Works of Love* is clear enough that this is the upshot:

> Through a strange misunderstanding, one is perhaps inclined to think that … Christianity were something halfway that is not supposed to permeate everything, as if the doctrine

[1] This is not to deny that he thinks that our ordinary loves cannot become non-preference-relative if we are not prepared also to love people in whom we have no preferential interest whatsoever. You can't exhibit non-preference-relative love only to those you prefer!

> about love for the neighbor were not specifically intended for that and thus for transforming erotic love and friendship …
> Christianity does not want to make changes in externals; neither does it want to abolish drives or inclination—it wants only to make infinity's change in the inner being …
> Without really being aware of it ourselves, we talk like pagans about erotic love and friendship, arrange our lives paganly in that regard, and then add a bit of Christianity about loving the neighbor—that is, a few other persons. But the man who does not see to it that his wife is to him the neighbor, and only then his wife, never comes to love the neighbor. (Kierkegaard 1995 [1847], pp. 112; 139; 141)

These passages raise further questions. What does it mean for our ordinary loves to be reoriented toward their *telos*? How is such transformation possible? How would a husband need to change in order to 'see to it that his wife is to him the neighbour'? Such questions have come to the fore in recent discussions of *Works of Love* and I want finally to draw out some implications of what we have seen so far for these debates.

§IV *The possibility of transformed preferential love*

Two rival models have emerged from recent discussions of *Works of Love* as ways of trying to make sense of Kierkegaard's critique, with respect to the idea of a suitably transformed form of preferential love. John Lippitt's idea is that such transformation is best understood on the model of two liquids passing through a filter:

> Suppose a guest wants a mixture of grapefruit juice and orange juice, but does not like the 'bits' contained in the only cartons of such juice that I have. I can get rid of the 'impurities' by passing both juices through an appropriate filter. Both the grapefruit juice (neighbour love) and the orange juice (romantic love) will make it through the filter; both will be contained in the liquid in its 'purified' form (a specific manifestation of romantic love in which the beloved is simultaneously viewed as my neighbour). (Lippitt 2012, pp. 195-196)

On Lippitt's filter model, the two manifestations of love can comingle only when both have passed through 'the God filter'. As Lippitt explains it, what this really means is that we must examine ourselves, whether our loves might be 'inconsistent with what Christianity teaches',

for example (Lippitt 2012, p. 191). Only once the moral impurities have been filtered out through this process of self-examination—only then can we properly heed Kierkegaard's injunction to preserve neighbourly love in our romances and other preferential loves.

Taking issue with Lippitt, Krishek adopts instead what we might call the onion model. On this view, our ordinary loves need to be transformed so that, as it were, layers of preferential love are formed around a core of neighbourly love. Krishek writes:

> Neighbourly love implies equality of both value and "treatment". However, when it comes to other kinds of love, further layers of "treatment" (such as passionate desire and psychical adherence, for example) are added to the basic kernel of neighbourly love. These further layers give preferential love its distinctive nature, rendering the demand for equality impossible. (Krishek 2014, p. 160)

Krishek's model reflects her view that, *contra* Kierkegaard, our friendships, romances and familial loves truly are species of a different *kind* of love to the neighbourly kind. Once we accept this, she thinks, and recognize the *sui generis* value of preferential love, we can see how love of the neighbourly sort can form the core of our various other loves, while preserving the inequalities of treatment that quite properly belong to their different kinds.

Behind their differences, we may observe this shared feature of the filter and onion models: they are *combinatorial*. The basic picture is that we have these two items, neighbourly love and preferential love, and we need a method somehow to mix or combine the two. Within this shared framework, the disagreement is then around how the two can be conjoined. Lippitt thinks they can be mixed, provided that they both undergo a certain process of purification; Krishek thinks the two can be combined, provided their distinctiveness as separate kinds of love is preserved in the combination.

Now, it should be clear that this combinatorial approach sits uneasily with Kierkegaard's teleological conception of the one true kind of love. Perceiving this, Krishek bites the bullet: while much can be salvaged from Kierkegaard's thinking about love, she suggests, we should jettison this core part of his view. For his part, Lippitt seems to try to resolve the problem by construing preferential love and non-preferential love as two different 'manifestations' of love (in some unspecified more general sense of 'love').[15] This, however, appears to be incompatible with Kierkegaard's claim that the one true kind of love is non-preferential. For, it apparently follows that non-preferential love cannot be on a par with preferential love as two manifestations of love in some more general sense.

I think the combinatorial approach has seemed attractive to critics at least in part because of the (understandable) impression of contradiction in the idea of non-preferential preferential love, i.e. the failure to distinguish the (non-)preference-relative from the (non-)preference-involving. For once we recognize this distinction there is no longer this need to think of neighbourly and preferential love as two kinds or manifestations that need combining. Instead, we can think of love as a single kind, just as Kierkegaard insists: the non-preference-relative kind that our preference-involving loves always strive to be, albeit in self-undermining ways. In keeping with Kierkegaard's teleological view, I therefore propose an alternative to both the filter and onion models: *the reorientation model*. On this model, our ordinary loves need to be reoriented toward their inner telos.

In closing, let me briefly address two natural questions about this reorientation model. I leave for another occasion the task of a full elaboration.

Firstly, does the model assume that humans are capable of attaining the perfectly decentred perspective of pure, self-giving love? We must certainly answer this question in the negative. To be well-oriented toward a goal is not to have attained it. In Kierkegaard's general view, it follows from our situatedness as finite, temporal beings that we can only ever be striving toward love's *telos*. Moreover, the task of reorienting our loves, so that they properly aim at this *telos*, is itself difficult and interminable—if only because our loves default to preference-relative mode. In practice, what is required will often be acknowledgement and confession: owning up to our selfishness.

We may add that it might not be good for finite agents like us to try to sustain the perfectly decentred outlook in which they care for the good of any other human in just the way they care for their own. For, would this not leave such agents paralyzed, cut off from what might move them to give concrete expression to their care? Does not love's power to draw us out of us ourselves depend on its power to grip our drives and passions? I think Kierkegaard's idea is rather this: moments of disruption, in which our experience approximates to the decentred perspective, can help to return us to the preferentially-structured world of our ordinary loves in a new way.[16] For him, such moments of disruption are, paradigmatically, moments of grace, in which we experience ourselves as loved by God in a radically non-preferential way. Living in the light of such disruptive experiences—whether recollecting them from the past or anticipating them again in the future—can help to reorient us in the present so that, while our loves will remain shaped by them, they will not be wholly circumscribed by our preferences. In short, while they may well be preference-involving, they will no longer be preference-relative.

For Kierkegaard, to live out our ordinary loves in this reoriented way is to learn anew to love 'the ones we *see'*—rather than the ones we would prefer to see. He writes:

> To be able to love a person despite his weaknesses and defects and imperfections is still not perfect love, but rather this, to be able to find him lovable despite and with his weaknesses and defects and imperfections. (Kierkegaard 1995 [1847], p. 158)

According to this subtle distinction, it is one thing to see a person as likeable in some respects but not in others and then to try hard to love them for who they are; but it is something else immediately to *see* a person *as* loveable *per se,* irrespective of how likeable. What makes the difference is a sort of aspect-shift: from seeing a person within the parameters set by a given preferential horizon to seeing the person in ways that cross this horizon. Accordingly, learning to love 'the ones you see' requires seeing them otherwise than as bundles of more or less attractive features. As Hannah Arendt put a related thought:

> The manifestation of who the speaker and doer unexchangeably is, though it is plainly visible, retains a curious intangibility that confounds all effort towards unequivocal verbal expression. The moment we want to say *who* somebody is our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him: we begin to describe a 'type' or 'character' ... with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us. (Arendt 1958, p. 181)

The difficulty of learning to see the other as loveable for who he or she 'unexchangeably is' explains why Kierkegaard thinks true love *necessarily* involves self-denial. For him, self-denial is not just a matter of forgoing particular desires for another's sake. Rather, it involves working against the grain of the ways in which others are disclosed to us by default—partial, exclusionary, conformist, and ephemeral as he thinks these ways are.

Secondly, is this model ineliminably theological or can it be secularized? There can be no doubt that, in *Works of Love*, God is all-important: as the ultimate object of love; as the 'middle term' in well-ordered human loves; as the disruptive impetus for all non-preferential love; as its ultimate exemplar; as the addressee of acts of confession.[17] In Kierkegaard's view, all preference-involving love can only remain preference-relative unless and until our loves become mediated not by our preferences alone but by the proper recognition of our human equality in God's love. However, this is not to gainsay that there may be secular

analogues to these religious ideas. For example, it may be that some human others are able to function for us as exemplars of loving the ones we see. Likewise, human others may on occasion be capable of disrupting the framework set by our preferences in ways that draw us out of ourselves and correspond to at least part of what believers attribute in this regard to divine grace.[18] Indeed, it is plausible that *Works of Love* is itself designed to serve this function for its readers, as a sort of call of conscience.[19]

Nonetheless, the idea of a fully secular version of the reorientation model faces serious challenges. There must be a question, for example, whether learning to love the ones you see is a task that is adequately served by trying to interpret others as equal in dignity merely *qua* rational beings. For Kierkegaard, such interpretations are too formal and abstract to disclose actual others as loveable *per se*, according to each person's 'specific uniqueness'. It is no doubt a major further question whether such challenges can be met, within a fully secular framework.[20] What I do hope to have established here is that such challenges are raised in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* in ways that cannot simply be dismissed as relevant only from the external standpoint of a particular brand of Christianity.[21]

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[1] See Kierkegaard (1995 [1847], p. 22ff). On Kierkegaard on the Good Samaritan, see also Watts (2017, p. 428ff).

[2] Cf. discussions in contemporary metaphysics around 'tropes', e.g. Mulligan et. al. (1984).

[3] As we will see, the 'only' is of critical importance here. It is not true that Kierkegaard thinks it is sufficient for love to count as 'selfish' that it expresses, for example, the natural inclinations of parenthood: what meets the relevant condition is the love that *only* expresses such preferences in the sense that its limits are their limits.

[4] This inference is commonplace in the critical literature on *Works of Love.* Thus, for example, in her review of Krishek (2009), Ferreira (2010) refers to what in Kierkegaard's view entails 'selfishness (something morally negative)'.

[5] From the perspective of the moralizing reading, Kierkegaard's critique stands in tension with the whole tradition of Catholic thought in which it belongs to grace to perfect our natural human loves. As John Lippitt puts it, 'Kierkegaard's colours seem to be nailed to a particular theological mast, taking a stance opposed to the idea that grace completes nature' (Lippitt 2012, p. 180). In fact, from this perspective, Kierkegaard's stance seems to involving taking sides on disputes *within* Lutheranism, not least regarding the controversies in the theology of creation at issue in Løgstrup's criticism of the Danish protestant tradition he associates with Kierkegaard. On the latter, see Gregersen (2017).

[6] This point is all the stronger given the possibility of a *modus tollens* use of the argument attributed to Kierkegaard by moralizing readers. That is, one might argue that, since there is nothing morally wrong with natural expressions of parental love, for example, there must be something wrong with (Kierkegaard's vision of) Christianity.

[7] Thus, for example, John Lippitt: 'even if [Kierkegaard] is right that friendship is a form of self-love this is so in an innocuous sense, such that the worry he builds on it … does not follow' (Lippitt 2013, p. 18).

[8] Phenomenological dimensions of Kierkegaard's philosophy of love are helpfully developed in Strawser (2015).

[9] We may also note here a contrast with any form of moral perfectionism in which a person's 'better' or 'higher' self can be understood individualistically and non-relationally. In Kierkegaard's perfectionism, one's better self is always a relational, decentred self.

[10] Compare Mark Johnston's interpretation of the command to love your neighbour as an '*identity-reconstituting* command': 'it requires that the one love the arbitrary other as oneself, but it also requires that one love oneself objectively; that is, as just the arbitrary other whose life one is nonetheless called upon to lead'. (Johnston 2009, p. 185)

[11] This point gives the lie to interpretations of Kierkegaard through the lens of Nygren (1938) (e.g. Jeanrond (2010)). As Pia Søloft rightly observes, 'Kierkegaard had a much more nuanced notion of love than that simple distinction between eros and agape that Anders Nygren invented' (2011, 37).

[12] Thus, for example, Kierkegaard will gloss the idea of preferential love as 'spontaneously loving according to preference' (1995 [1847], p. 36)

[13] For a discussion, see Stern (2019 pp. 236ff).

[14] 'That an expectancy is essentially only temporal makes for restlessness in expectancy … But the one who loves, who abides, has an eternal expectancy, and this eternal element provides evenness in the restlessness, which in time does indeed oscillate between fulfillment and nonfulfillment but independently of time, inasmuch as the fulfillment is by no means made impossible because time is over—this one who loves does not wither away (Kierkegaard 1995 [1847], p. 313). On Kierkegaard's idea of the eternal in love, see Watts (2019).

[15] This at least is suggested by the language, in the passage cited in the main text above (Lippitt 2012, pp. 195-196), of 'neighbour love' and 'romantic love' as two manifestations of love, and of Lippitt's talk of a purified love which contains 'components of both neighbour love and romantic love' (p. 195). However, Lippitt's discussion seems to pull in different directions on this point, since he also emphasizes Kierkegaard's one-love claim, according to which *any* manifestation of genuine love is a manifestation of non-preferential (i.e. non-preference-relative) love.

[16] Admittedly, about the task of 'making all love a matter of conscience', and with particular reference to 'erotic love and friendship', Kierkegaard does write that this 'can signify the cooling of the passions' (1995 [1847], p. 147). This formulation, however, is notably circumspect and Kierkegaard immediately balances the point with reference to the intensified 'inwardness' of genuine love.

[17] Kierkegaard's theology of love is in many respects Augustinian. On love in the Augustinian tradition, and as one of the three so-called theological virtues, see Batho (2016).

[18] Or, in Murdoch's well-known illustration, it may be a passing kestrel that draws us out of ourselves (Murdoch 1970, p. 84).

[19] A stimulating reading of *Works of Love* as, first and foremost, a call to confession is developed in Hall (2009).

[20] Attempts to develop a secular ethics of undiscriminating love, beyond notions of dignity and respect, include Gaita (2002) and Cordner (2011).

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