Love's Object, Love's Aim

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On a standard approach, love's proper object is construed in terms of personhood or rational agency. Some philosophers in this broadly Kantian tradition deny that love has a proper aim: specifically, they reject the idea that love properly aims at the good of the beloved. They worry about paternalism and encroachment. In this chapter, we show how Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* advances a rival approach: one which provides an account of how love can properly aim at the good of the beloved, without thereby becoming objectionably paternalistic or encroaching, together with an alternative conception of love's object. We bring out the significant advantages of this approach, which emphasizes our human interdependence and mutual vulnerability. Through a comparison with the ethical thought of K. E. Løgstrup, whose philosophy of love we present as standing in significant continuity with Kierkegaard's, we further show how the expressly theological framework advanced in *Works of Love* may also be developed in a more secular direction.

David Velleman has argued that a condition of genuine love is that it does not encroach upon its object. In "Love as a Moral Emotion," Velleman writes:

> Of course, there are occasions for pleasing and impressing the people one loves, just as there are occasions for caring and sharing. But someone whose love was a bundle of these urges, to care and share and please and impress—such a lover would be an interfering, ingratiating nightmare.[1]

Moved by considerations like these, some philosophers have sought to sever any essential connection between love and care, in the sense of seeking another's good.[2] Thus, on Velleman's own view—which takes its lead from Kant—love is dissociated from care and treated instead on the model of respect, conceived as an attitude toward the intrinsic value of humanity.[3] So conceived, love is "essentially an attitude toward the beloved himself but not toward any result at all."[4] On this approach, love properly has an *object* but not an *aim*.

A contrasting view is suggested already by the title of Kierkegaard's major work on Christian love: *Works of Love* (*Kjerlighedens Gjerninger*). And our own aim

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[1] J. David Velleman, "Love as a Moral Emotion," in *Self to Self: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 87.

[2] Other theorists who dissociate love from care include Kyla Ebels-Duggan, "Against Beneficence: A Normative Account of Love," *Ethics* 119, no. 1 (2008): 142-170; Kieran Setiya, "Love and the Value of a Life," *The Philosophical Review* 123, no. 3 (2014): 251-280; Getty L. Lustilla, "A Minimalist Account of Love," in *Love, Justice, and Autonomy: Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Rachel Fedock, Michael Kühler, T. Raja Rosenhagen (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 61-78.

[3] Kant himself defines love and respect as feelings that accompany the exercise of our duties toward others which, while they can come apart in practice, "are basically always united by the law into one duty[.]" Notably, Kant distinguishes between love and respect more sharply than do some of his followers. He writes that, whereas love "bids friends to draw closer," respect on the other hand "requires them to stay at a proper distance from each other." Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991), [6:449], [6:470]. For discussion, see Carla Bagnoli, "Respect and Loving Attention," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 33, no. 4 (2003): 483-515.

[4] Velleman, *Self to Self*, 88.

here is to consider the relationship between love and works.[5] Is it essential for love to express itself in certain actions (*Gjerninger*) toward the beloved? Or is love an attitude that can or should bear no relation to works? Can our love have an object but no aim?

We shall take up these questions with primary reference to *Works of Love*. Our first aim is to reassess Kierkegaard's conception of neighbour love, particularly with respect to this challenge: in caring for the beloved, is it possible to avoid encroaching upon them? We shall argue that, under Kierkegaard's conception of ideal neighbour love, it is indeed possible for care to be incorporated into love but without the love thereby becoming encroaching. We shall further argue, however, that Kierkegaard's conception of ideal neighbour love also makes room for important modes of attention to the particularity and individuality of love's object.

In the course of this assessment, we also propose to develop a comparison with the thought of the lesser-known twentieth-century Danish thinker, K. E. Løgstrup. Within the literature on *Works of Love*, Løgstrup is typically brought into the discussion, if he is brought in at all, as one of Kierkegaard's vehement opponents. Indeed, his book *Controverting Kierkegaard—Opgør med Kierkegaard*, which might be better translated as *Showdown* or *Settling the Score with Kierkegaard*—brings

[5] In taking up this question, we follow Kierkegaard's focus on "neighbour love," leaving it open how neighbour love may be related, for example, to romantic or sexual love. For a discussion of Kierkegaard's conception of the relationship between neighbour love and other putative types of love, see Daniel Watts, "Love's Telos: Kierkegaard's Critique of Preferential Love," in *Philosophy of Love in the Past, Present, and Future*, eds. André Grahle, Natasha McKeever, Joe Saunders (London: Routledge, 2022), 54-72. As we discuss in the main text below, Kierkegaard maintains that the demands of neighbour love apply no less to our intimate relationships than to encounters of the kind dramatized in Jesus' parable of the man wounded on the road to Jericho.

to a head Løgstrup's concerns about the undue asceticism, and personal defensiveness, that he discerned in Kierkegaard's opposition between pure, Christian love and natural, spontaneous love. Notwithstanding this polemical context, however, it is part of our aim here to bring out the shared framework within which Kierkegaard and Løgstrup can be seen subsequently to part ways. What these two Danish thinkers fundamentally share, as we shall show, is a certain conception of love as flowing from our human interdependence and therefore as properly expressing itself in care.[6]

This common ground between them reflects the shared tradition within which Kierkegaard and Løgstrup were working. This tradition was shaped by a Lutheran conception of the love of the neighbour as grounded not in striving to make oneself pleasing to God, but in being liberated from self-absorption through the experience of God's unearned love.[7] In *Works of Love*—written from an expressly Christian point of view—Kierkegaard develops this Lutheran theme in his own way, emphasizing the centrality of "the God-relationship" for true neighbour love. As we shall also see, however, Løgstrup also develops the tradition but in a more secular

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[6] The claim we are interested in here, that care is essential to love, is not the claim that love is *reducible* to care. For an account of love's irreducibility to care, see Agnieszka Jaworska and Monique Wonderly, "Love and Caring," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Love*, eds. Christopher Grau and Aaron Smuts (Online edn: Oxford Academic, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199395729.013.15.

[7] As he put it in *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther sought to show "how love and pleasure for God flow out of faith and how out of love flows a free, willing, and cheerful life, [lived] freely, serving the neighbour for nothing[.]" Martin Luther, *Luther's Spirituality*, ed. and trans. Philip D.W. Krey and Peter D.S. Krey (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), 87. On the reception of Luther in Denmark, see Niels Henrik Gregersen, "Martin Luther in Denmark," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (Online edn: Oxford University Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.319. On Luther's departure from medieval conceptions of Christian love, see e.g. Irving Singer, "Luther versus Caritas," in *The Nature of Love* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 312-342.

direction. And it is part of our wider aim here to help to make a case for the ongoing philosophical importance of this tradition, whether within or outside of a theological framework.

In §II below we shall show how both Kierkegaard and Løgstrup are alive to the problem of encroachment and consider how, in their different ways, they seek to overcome it. In §III, we shall further bring out a significant advantage of this Danish tradition in the philosophy of love, when compared to Kantian views like Velleman's. This comparison is grounded in the need to account for the specificity of love's orientation: as directed toward concrete individuals rather than generic kinds. To anticipate: Kierkegaard and Løgstrup maintain that love properly attends to a person in his or her particularity and individuality in ways that are liable to get lost in any approach in which love is conceived as directed toward the generic value of humanity.

We begin, however, with the governing conception of our human interdependence that guides the approaches of both Kierkegaard and Løgstrup.

1. Love and dependence

In his book *Dependent Rational Animals*, Alasdair MacIntyre remarks:

> We human beings are vulnerable to many kinds of affliction and most of us are at some time afflicted by serious ills. How we cope is only in small part up to us. It is most often to others that we owe our survival, let alone our flourishing, as we

> encounter bodily illness and injury, inadequate nutrition, mental defect and disturbance, and human aggression and neglect.[8]

MacIntyre's book seeks a corrective to standard approaches in virtue ethics that focus solely on the idea of human beings as individual rational agents, independent, empowered, autonomous. We think his title, "Dependent Rational Animals," is apt to serve also as a slogan for the view that Kierkegaard and Løgstrup share. For, they both relate love to our human interdependence and mutual vulnerability. Consider, for instance, the following from *Works of Love*:

> So deeply is this need [sc. to love and be loved] rooted in human nature, and so *essentially* does it belong to being human, that even he who was one with the Father and in the communion of love with the Father and the Spirit, he who loved the whole human race, our Lord Jesus Christ, even he humanly felt this need to love and be loved by an individual human being. […] He was not an ethereal figure that beckoned in the clouds without understanding or wanting to understand what humanly befalls a human being. Ah, no, he could have compassion on the crowd that lacked food, and purely humanly, he who himself had hungered in the desert. In the same way he could also sympathize with people in this need to love and to be loved, sympathize purely humanly. (WL, 155/SKS 9, 156)

[8] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court, 2006), 1.

Particularly in the light of the critical obloquy that has been directed toward *Works of Love* – as allegedly promoting an ascetic ideal of love, austere and denatured—it is striking how Kierkegaard presents Christ, as love's very paradigm, not as "an ethereal figure" but on the contrary as one who "humanly felt this need to love and be loved" and did so with respect to mundane, material, human needs.[9] For Kierkegaard, that even the holy one himself exemplifies the human need to love and be loved attests to just "how deeply the need of love is rooted in human nature" (WL, 154/SKS 9, 155). Elsewhere in *Works of Love*, he likewise juxtaposes the sense in which neighbour love is truly *independent*—that is, independent from any comparative assessment of the relative worth of its object—with "the proud independence that thinks it has no need to feel loved" (WL, 39/SKS 9, 46). This latter pose of individual independence is self-deceptive and illusory, Kierkegaard

[9] *Works of Love* has often been charged with denaturing love. According to Adorno, Kierkegaard's doctrine "demands that love behave towards all men as if they were dead." Theodor W. Adorno, "On Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 8, no. 3 (1939): 413-429. Løgstrup complains that, within Kierkegaard's approach, "[i]t is therefore something close to a grotesque coincidence that the relationship to the other human being which is defined by passionate love, and the relationship of love to the neighbour, have the same name." Knud E. Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, trans. Bjørn Rabjerg and Robert Stern (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 197-198. Irving Singer hypothesizes that Kierkegaard's thinking about love "would seem to have atrophied" once his personal difficulties with Regine Olsen "had been quieted by her marriage to someone else[,]" with the consequence that "[t]he doctrine in *Works of Love* … scarcely helps us to understand the erotic problems of ordinary people seeking enlightenment about instincts, impulses, conflicting emotions in their daily existence." Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love: the Modern World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 48. For discussion of criticisms along these lines, see e.g. M. Jamie Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving: a Commentary on Kierkegaard's* Works of Love (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); M. Jamie Ferreira, "The Problematic Agapeist Ideal—Again," in *Ethics, Love, and Faith in Kierkegaard: Philosophical Engagements*, ed. Edward F. Mooney (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 93-110; Alastair Hannay, 'Proximity as Apartness' in *Kierkegaard and Philosophy: Selected Essays* (London: Routledge, 2003): 150-162; Sharon Krishek, *Kierkegaard on Faith and Love*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Watts, "Love's Telos."

observes, if only because it pretends not to need others but in fact does so precisely "in order to have someone to love" (WL, 39/SKS 9, 46).

If love's basis in our creaturely neediness and mutual dependence is implicit throughout *Works of Love*, this connection is drawn out all the more explicitly in Løgstrup's major work, *The Ethical Demand*. Our human interdependence, he argues, is woven deeply into our lives together:

> An individual never has something to do with another human being without holding something of that person's life in their hands. It can be a very small matter, a passing mood, a dampening or quickening of spirit, a disgust one deepens or takes away. But it may also be of tremendous significance, so that it is simply up to the individual whether the other person's life flourishes or not.[10]

Løgstrup makes the claim here that it is not just in the obvious case of a child's relation to an adult that dependence is to be found and love expressed, but in a whole range of ordinary human relationships, from mundane cases where you cheer me up on a gloomy day, to more fundamental cases in which you restore my trust in life itself. When this is pointed out, Løgstrup accepts that our self-belief in a kind of purely autonomous dependence on oneself alone may encourage us to overlook or neglect this dependence on others, but once it is pointed out it cannot really be ignored, given the kind of creatures we are.

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[10] Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 15.

Accordingly, on the overall approach shared by Kierkegaard and Løgstrup (and arguably, by MacIntyre too) our mutual dependencies, for our very chances of human flourishing, constitute the fundamental conditions of ethical life. While they both also take their lead from the Biblical injunction to love your neighbour as yourself, it is on the basis of this interdependence that they maintain that love must involve care.[11]

For Kierkegaard, learning to care in the appropriate way requires cultivating a new mode of responsiveness to our fellow humans, as equal before God: equally worthy of love, equally needy.[12] That is, we must learn to care for each other in ways that cut through all worldly hierarchies of rank and esteem, transcending the horizons of our given preferences and prejudices. Kierkegaard deploys in this connection an image of loosened garments. Cultivating neighbour love, he argues, requires us to loosen our attachments to the social roles and statuses that distinguish individuals and groups among us and thereby establish hierarchies, supporting interpersonal comparisons of relative worth and moral standing. He argues that we must learn to loosen our grip on these social differentiae so that, in the "holy moment" of action we are ready to cast them aside, as though mere outer garments,

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[11] Løgstrup makes it clear that he sees our mutual interdependence as a fundamental truth that, while it can be recognized independently of any Biblical revelation, is reflected in and attested by "Jesus's proclamation." He writes: "If we were so independent of one another than the words and works of one other person were a mere luxury in the existence of the other, so that one's failure could always be made good later, God's relationship to the individual would consist in a looser relationship to the individual's relationship to the other human being than is the case in Jesus's proclamation." Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 6.

[12] According to Kierkegaard's religiously inflected (and more specifically Lutheran) conception, our human equality is therefore not to be understood in a narrowly political way, e.g. in terms of our bearing the same "inalienable" rights, but instead in terms of our having the same standing before God, as equally in need of his mercy and grace.

and respond to each other merely in view of their humanity (WL, 90/SKS 9, 95). Such transformed responsiveness to others is what he takes to be exemplified by the Samaritan in Jesus' parable who—despite being predisposed *not* to respond in this way "because of prejudice"—was ready to respond spontaneously as a neighbour to the Jewish stranger whose wounds he tended (WL, 22/SKS 9, 30).

Kierkegaard's interpretation of the injunction to love your neighbour as yourself turns on his reading of the clause, "as yourself." While famously suspicious of much what we typically extol as love, as really only disguised selfishness, he also insists on a sense in which true love for the neighbour presupposes, and is continuous with, "proper self-love" (WL, 18/SKS 9, 26).[13] Just as proper self-love is care for the self—care for one's own good—so, he maintains, neighbour love must involve care for the neighbour's good. More precisely, on Kierkegaard's account, self-love can take an unselfish form only when it *becomes*—that is, is reconstituted as—neighbour love. Unlike "selfish self-love[,]" in which I am the centre of my world of concerns (WL, 151/SKS 9, 152), proper self-love is a decentred kind of self-concern in which I care for myself as your neighbour just as I care for you as mine. This symmetry of care, for others as for oneself, is what Kierkegaard calls love's "eternal like for like" (WL, 255/SKS 9, 256).[14]

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[13] Kierkegaard observes: "When it is said, 'You shall love your neighbor [Næste] as yourself,' this contains what is presupposed, that every person loves himself" (WL, 17/SKS 9, 25). On Kierkegaard's contrast between selfish self-love and proper self-love, see John Lippitt, *Kierkegaard and the Problem of Self-Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[14] This conception of proper self-love anticipates Mark Johnston's interpretation of the injunction to love your neighbour as an "identity-reconstituting command." According to Johnston, neighbour love "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

What does it mean to care for a person's good, whether one's own or that of another? As we have noted, Kierkegaard certainly allows that part of what this means is attending to the person as a finite creature: embodied, dependent, vulnerable, needy.[15] In a given situation, the appropriate outward expression of such care may just mean doing all one can, for example, to tend another person's bodily wounds. It remains true, however, that Kierkegaard conceives of the care involved in proper self-love and (by the same token) in neighbour love as ultimately care with respect to a person's need for God. As we shall see—in §2 below—Kierkegaard's way of dealing with the threat of encroachment crucially relies on this theological dimension of his account.

Partly moved by concerns about the danger of over-spiritualizing love, however, and also by his overall project of seeing how far the injunction to love your neighbour can be made out "in purely human terms," Løgstrup conceives of care without reference to the notion of a person's "God-relationship."[16] He argues instead that, because others are dependent upon us, this gives us power over them, and that this power must be used for their good. This "must" is the implicit content of the demand expressed in Jesus' proclamation: what Løgstrup calls, "the ethical demand." As he also formulates it, the implicit content of this demand is that "the other's life should be cared for in a way that best serves the other."[17]

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nonetheless called upon to lead." Mark Johnston, *Saving God: Religion After Idolatry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 185. Cf. Watts, "Love's Telos," 62.

[15] Attested by his prominent use of the parable of the Good Samaritan in *Works of Love*, love's proper interest in bodily needs can be seen to follow directly from Kierkegaard's conception of the object of care as the human self as a whole, given his non-dualistic conception of the latter as partly constituted by a "synthesis" of mind and body.

[16] Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 4-7, 93.

[17] Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 48.

Despite his use of the language of demands and duties, however, Løgstrup also insists that the task of caring for others in this way should not in practice present itself to us *as* a demand. Instead, he argues, this task should be seen as a work of *love,* hence not really as a demand or obligation at all. In this respect, Løgstrup distances himself from a more Kantian ethics by arguing that acting on duty is no more than a second-best option; for it is then not genuinely an act of love, for which duty as a sense of demand or obligation plays no role, but only concern for the other person.[18]

Thus, Kierkegaard and Løgstrup share the view that humans are vulnerable and needy, standing to each other in fundamental relationships of interdependence. And this is why, on both of their accounts, loving attention to the other person cannot merely involve an awareness of their value but must also involve awareness of their human neediness, which then calls for a response of care. On this approach—it might be called the Danish tradition in the philosophy of love—it is fundamental rather than incidental that love involves *works*, directed at the good of the beloved.[19]

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[18] See for example Løgstrup's discussion in *Controverting Kierkegaard*, where he distinguishes between the actual Good Samaritan who acts out of love, and a "Kantian Samaritan" who is compassionate out of duty because he is tempted to act in a non-caring way, and so needs to act from a sense of duty in order to resist this temptation. As a result, Løgstrup suggests, this is "morality as a substitute, and there is no other morality" which is "better than brutality and indifference, but worse than the immediate fulfilment of compassion's sovereign expression of life." Thus, for Løgstrup, "[d]uty presents itself when I am wriggling out of the situation." Knud E. Løgstrup, *Controverting Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 95. For further discussion, see Robert Stern, "'Duty and Virtue are Moral Introversions': On Løgstrup's Critique of Morality," in *What is Ethically Demanded? K.E. Løgstrup's Philosophy of Moral Life*, eds. Hans Fink and Robert Stern (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 300-324.

[19] This Danish tradition notably anticipates the feminist 'ethics of care' (e.g. Annette C. Baier, "The Need for More than Justice," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* Supplementary Volume 13 (1987): 41-56; Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's*

We turn now to consider the challenge that may be pressed, however, by friends of a more Kantian approach, such as Velleman's: in caring for the beloved, is it possible to avoid encroaching upon them?

2. Love without encroachment

Kierkegaard is certainly alive to the worry about encroachment. In *Works of Love,* this issue is articulated as a twofold danger: either of tending to arrogate for oneself the role of God for the beloved or, conversely, of tending to treat the beloved as though they were themselves divine. Kierkegaard presents both tendencies as fundamentally deceptive, whether I am encroaching upon another or am allowing the other to encroach upon me. "To love another person as God[,]" he writes, "is to deceive oneself[;]" conversely, "to allow another person to love one as God is to deceive this other person" (WL, 108/SKS 9, 112).

How then are we to avoid these defective and overreaching forms of care? Kierkegaard offers the same antidote for both. The only way for love relationships truly to stay healthy and to flourish, he argues, is for God to function within them as "the middle term" (WL, 107/SKS 9, 111). On this view, the mediating perspective in which we see ourselves and each other "before God," as equal and equally needy, is

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Development (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986). The central themes of this approach, on which MacIntyre's *Dependent Rational Animals* also draws, are "the fundamental particularity and interdependence of persons, loving attention and understanding as primary modes of moral response, and insistence on active, sympathetic concern for another's good." Robin S. Dillon, "Respect and Care: Towards Moral Integration," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 22, no. 1 (1992): 115.

apt to prevent us from attributing the wrong sort of value to ourselves or to other humans. It does so (*inter alia*) by preventing us from attributing absolute rather than relative value to ourselves or to the other person, since absolute value is instead attributed to God.[20] This in turn prevents love relationships becoming too "claustrophobic," as it were, undermining the distinction between oneself and the other in a way that can lead to encroachment.

Notably, this interpretation of the role of "the middle-term" in Kierkegaard's conception of well-ordered love does *not* rely on the idea that works of love are legitimate or genuine only when they are based upon a prior process of practical reasoning about what best expresses or promotes love for God. Løgstrup—we think rightly—took exception to views in which love is genuine only when it is mediated by prior reflection on one's religious duties and by deliberation about how best to fulfil them. It is certainly true that Kierkegaard supposes that attending to the command and duty to love, as such, plays an important role in the process described above: the process in which we prepare ourselves to attend to the humanity in others, beyond the horizons of given social orders and prejudicial perceptions. Importantly, however, when it comes to particular works of love, he does not suppose that these must be based on prior processes of religiously-based practical reasoning.[21] On the contrary, Kierkegaard emphasizes how, in relation to works of

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[20] On Kierkegaard's governing distinction between absolute and relative value, see Robert Stern and Daniel Watts, "Valuing Humanity: Kierkegaardian Worries About Korsgaardian Transcendental Arguments," *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 80 no. 4-5 (2019): 424-442.

[21] For this reason, Løgstrup's critique of this view being focused primarily on Kierkegaard is arguably misdirected (for a summary of this critique, see for example the "Polemical Epilogue" of *The Ethical Demand*). Likewise, Adorno arguably misinterprets "the middle

love, the ongoing processes of "loosening the garments" of social distinctions and "dying to" our preferences and prejudices are merely preparatory and enabling.[22] As he presents them, these spiritual exercises do not themselves constitute works of love but are instead ways to foster the ability to perform such works by responding to others in concrete situations *as* one's neighbour, immediately and directly.

These points help to interpret Kierkegaard's notion of care with respect to a person's "God-relationship." Negatively, the aim of such care is to avoid imposing upon oneself or another burdens of dependency and attachment that would truly be capable of being borne only by God himself. In practice, this might mean observing certain constraints on how one expresses one's care: for example, by being avoiding allowing others to become overly dependent on one in ways that, in the long run, prevent them from flourishing; or again, by resisting any temptation to pander to a person's selfishness.[23] More positively, the aim is to help to liberate individuals from unhealthy forms of human-human dependency and from the self-absorption that comes from treating oneself as though one were God: kinds of liberation that, as Kierkegaard see it, are truly in every person's interests.[24] Invoking the paradoxical

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term" when he characterizes Kierkegaard's ethical ideal as loving the other person "for God's sake." Adorno, "On Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love," 438.

[22] For further development of this reading, see Daniel Watts, "Kierkegaard, Repetition, and Ethical Constancy," *Philosophical Investigations* 40, no. 4 (2017): 428ff.

[23] Kierkegaard even suggests that loving care may more purely manifest itself in an attitude of non-interfering attentiveness, "lest one disturb the joy and happiness of others[,]" than in one's acting "powerfully to remedy the needs of others" (WL, 326/SKS 9, 322).

[24] Regarding the notion of aiming to help the other person to love God, Adorno complains that "Kierkegaard never concretely states what this love means." Adorno, "On Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love," 439. This criticism appears to miss the principled reason why Kierkegaard declines to specify the content of this aim: namely, that he thinks it is part of this aim to preserve the other person's independence with respect to what loving God might mean *for them*.

structure of the maieutic teaching of Socrates, he accordingly sums up love's fulfilment in this characteristic formula: "to stand alone—by another's help" (WL, 275 / SKS 9, 273).[25]

Turning again to Løgstrup, he is likewise highly sensitive to the worry about encroachment. He raises the issue explicitly himself, at the end of Chapter One of *The Ethical Demand* where he asks, in §5, "Does the Demand Encourage Encroachment?", addressing it there and also in Chapter Two. And he accepts this worry might seem very pressing. This is not least because, on his account, the ethical demand is "silent." For Løgstrup, this means, in part, that we should not just do what the other person tells us to do, but instead what is truly in their interests. Were we to be guided solely by what the other person asks or demands, he thinks, this would not truly be to care for them, but to do what makes life easier for ourselves since this avoids any confrontation with the other and "flatters" them.

But the question arises again: why does not this approach become objectionably paternalistic, as we impose our conception of the good on the other person? By contrast with Kierkegaard, Løgstrup does not want to appeal here to the

[25] Regarding Socrates, Kierkegaard writes: "This noble rogue had understood in the profound sense that the highest [task] one human being can perform for another is to make him free, help him to stand by himself—and he had also understood himself in understanding this, that is, he had understood that if this is to be done the helper must be able to make himself hidden, must magnanimously will to annihilate himself" (WL, 276/SKS 9, 274). Also notable in this connection is the returning motif in *Works of Love* of "the conversation of love"(WL, 314/SKS 9, 311). Cf. Nora Kreft's account of love as essentially autonomy-promoting in virtue of being animated by the desire for "deep conversation" with the beloved. Nora Isolde Kreft, "Love and Autonomy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Love*, eds. Christopher Grau and Aaron Smuts (Online edn.: Oxford Academic, 2017), https://doi.10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199395729.013.17

aim to preserve the other's independence with respect to their own relationship to God. He does make several points in response, however, as follows.

Firstly, Løgstrup supposes that, with respect to the human good, we can assume some basic agreement. Consider, for instance, a case in which one comes across a stranger in the street who is evidently suffering a heart attack. It surely would not be fitting in such a case to agonize over whether or not they themselves, or anyone else, would deem it truly in the interests of this person to receive suitable medical assistance. On the contrary—on the view Løgstrup supports—it is only right in such circumstances to do all one can, and to call on further expertise as appropriate, without delay. While reasonable disagreements about boundary-cases may arise, and while the actual agreement of a given person cannot always be guaranteed, it holds for a central range of human needs that it is perfectly in order for us to take it to be in a person's real interests for their needs to be met.

Secondly, however, Løgstrup also accepts that one's understanding of life can become what he calls an "ideology," which one then seeks to impose on another person. Once one has an ideology, Løgstrup argues, imposing this on the world then becomes one's primary goal, so that one's interest in individuals themselves drops away – where Løgstrup actually gives Christianity as a potential example, when it has been reduced to "proselytizing, and is set into the field to battle for a particular Church[,]" so that "[t]he other human being then becomes the object of some cause which is to be promoted."[26]

[26] Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 96.

Thirdly, Løgstrup argues that if we are to prevent ourselves from imposing upon the other person ideologically, we need to recognise the limits of our power over them. That is, we need to recognize that, while we have their well-being in our hands, we do not have their *will* in our hands. To act as though we did have their will in our hands would be to seek to gain more power over them, Løgstrup maintains, rather than use the power we already have for their good.[27] As he puts it:

> From this fundamental dependence and immediate power, the demand arises that we take care of that in the other person's life which is dependent upon us, and which we have in our power. However, based on the same demand, it is forbidden that we ever attempt to rob the other person of their independence, even for their own sake. Responsibility for the other person can never consist in our taking on the responsibility which is their own.[28]

Finally, Løgstrup maintains that, while we cannot prevent some clashes arising over views of the good, and thus how the other should be treated, we need

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[27] By contrast with Løgstrup's emphasis on the power we have over each other, arising from our interdependence, and the attendant risks of abuses of power, the emphasis in *Works of Love* is instead on how care for a person can still be possible even when one is materially powerless to help them (see especially the discourse, "Mercifulness, a Work of Love Even If It Can Give Nothing and is Able to Do Nothing" (WL, 315-330/SKS 9, 312-326)). Notably, however, Kierkegaard's late writings show an increasing concern with abuses of power. For example: "the power-seeker too easily becomes one who misuses his power in order to tyrannize, or one whom the desire to rule brings into a concealed relation of dependency on those whom he is supposed to rule, so that his ruling actually becomes an optical illusion" (MLW, 91/SKS 13, 129).

[28] Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 26. Compare Sarah Clark Miller's conception of "dignifying care", i.e. care that "magnifies, nurtures, and promotes the inherent dignity of those in need[.]" Sarah Clark Miller, *The Ethics of Need: Agency, Dignity, and Obligation* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 83.

not suppose that such clashes are, in general, irresolvable. On the contrary, where such clashes arise as we appeal to norms rather than treat the conflict as purely personal, he argues that we should nonetheless not simply assume we are right in our conception of those norms, but should communicate with the other person over the differences, and seek consensus in a fallibilistic spirit:

> There is thus the will to include them, just as there is also a will to create space for them in their relation to the norm, in order that their compliance may be voluntary. In the coming together concerning the norms, provided we do not arrogate them entirely to ourselves, and refrain from using them as a guillotine with which to execute the other person, then love has its chance.[29]

Working to "create space" for the other person, in this sense, avoids the dilemma of either ideologically imposing oneself upon them or else withdrawing one's care for fear of encroaching upon them (but, given that we can assume some agreement about the good, we should not be over-inclined to false doubts either).

Both Kierkegaard and Løgstrup can therefore be seen to offer more promising versions of what Kyla Ebels-Duggan has criticized as, "The Benefactor View."[30] Typifying her target by Harry Frankfurt's conception of love as "a concern for the well-being or flourishing of the beloved[,]"[31] Ebels-Dugan shows how Frankfurt's own version of this view problematically treats the relationship between parents and

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[29] Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand,* 26.
[30] Ebels-Duggan, "Against Beneficence," 144ff.
[31] Harry G. Frankfurt, *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 165.

infants as paradigmatic of loving care. By contrast, as we have seen, while they agree that love aims at the good, Kierkegaard and Løgstrup are careful to account for the conditions under which loving care can be appropriately expressed, without infantilizing the other person or robbing them of their independence.

Having discussed how they can respond to the worry about encroachment, we want finally to propose that the approaches of Kierkegaard and Løgstrup can also address a certain weakness in more Kantian approaches like Velleman's with respect to the question: how is it that love can be focused on a particular individual?

3. Loving the individual

The issue of how to account for the particularity of love's object arises as a difficulty for any view in which love is modelled on the attitude of respect, conceived as a way of appreciating the generic value of humanity. For, the objection naturally arises that, on any such view, love seems to lose its character of being a response to the individual in their particularity. How can a single individual be the object of love when, on the other hand, what is valued in them is a property that they share equally with all? Specifically with reference to Velleman's account of love as a moral emotion, this line of criticism has been pressed by Nick Zangwill:

> But that positive value [i.e. the value that Velleman thinks love is a response to] is something fundamentally generic, the same in all persons. The particularity of other people, that which makes them distinctive, plays only a facilitating role for

> Velleman. This seems wrong. Love is a celebration of particularity, not of what is universal and generic.[32]

Zangwill's criticism of Velleman is consonant with worries of a familiar sort about Kantian moral theory more broadly.[33] For, on any approach that involves testing maxims to see if they can hold as universal laws, the concern arises that we then abstract away from individuals and so lose touch with ethical regard as a concrete relation, holding between individuals. Indeed, this process of abstraction is arguably at the root of the so-called "empty formalism" objections to Kantianism.[34]

Returning in this connection to Kierkegaard and Løgstrup, we want finally to establish two points: firstly, that their accounts can help to underwrite the intuition that something has gone wrong with any account that implies that love's object is essentially generic rather than particular; but, secondly, that in a certain way this Danish tradition also stands opposed to the blunt dichotomy that, for his part, Zangwill sets up between respect for that which is ethically universal and the "celebration of particularity[.]" Part of what recommends the approaches of

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[32] Nick Zangwill, "Love: Gloriously Amoral and Arational," *Philosophical Explorations* 16, no. 3 (2013): 298-314.

[33] As Robin Dillon puts it, regarding Kantian ethics, 'the morally significant feature of persons on this view is something abstract and generic, not what distinguishes one individual from another but what makes us all indistinguishably equal[.]' Dillon, "Respect and Care," 116.

[34] The progenitors of this line of criticism of Kant were Schiller and Hegel. See, e.g., Friedrich Schiller, "On Grace and Dignity," trans. Jane V. Curran, in *Schiller's 'On Grace and Dignity' in Its Cultural Context: Essays and a New Translation*, eds. Jane V. Curran and Christophe Fricker (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2005), 123-170; Georg W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942), 90. See also Francis H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), 181. For discussion, see e.g. Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 180-198; Christine M. Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 77-105.

Kierkegaard and Løgstrup, we submit, is their ability to explain not only how love can be directed toward particular individuals but also how, with respect to its objects, this can be compatible with the universality of its scope.

An account of how love can be focused on particular individuals, compatibly with its universality, falls directly out of the overall approach that Løgstrup shares with Kierkegaard. As we saw in §1 above, this approach is guided by a view in which loving attention cannot consist merely in the awareness of a person's value, as an object of respect, but must also involve awareness of their human neediness, which then calls for a response of care. On this account, we are all dependent and needy creatures, simply *qua* human, and so potential objects of care. At one level, then, there are these shared properties—we are all needy and vulnerable creatures, all dependent on others in various ways—which give rise to a general ethical principle, such as "love thy neighbour" or the demand that "the other's life should be cared for in a way that best serves the other."[35] (To that extent, from the perspective of the approaches of Kierkegaard and Løgstrup, Zangwill goes too far in rejecting universality in all its forms.) On the other hand, however, what this love is, and involves, relates to the details of a particular case of need, where what it is to care for one person will differ from another and expressing this care will require attending to them in their particularity.

It is in order to bring out the universal and yet nonetheless differentiating character of love that a striking passage in *Works of Love* deploys a picture of the rich diversity of ways of flourishing in nature. Kierkegaard writes:

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[35] Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 48.

> Let us for a moment look at nature. 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 meadow! There is no difference in the love, no, none—yet what a difference in the flowers! 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. 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, which is just like the first, it infinitely distinguishes itself in loving the diverse. (WL, 269-267/SKS 9, 268)

Kierkegaard's thought is this: "nature, or God in nature" cares no less for one flower than another and yet helps each one, individually, to flourish in its own distinctive way; by analogy, while it is true that we should in principle care no less for one human being than another, nonetheless our care can only properly express itself when, attending to others in their particular distinctiveness, we seek to help them to flourish *as* single individuals. Thus, as Kierkegaard concludes, "true love loves every human being according to the person's distinctiveness" (WL, 270/SKS 9, 269).

Having lyrically invoked the beauty of the meadow, Kierkegaard immediately and characteristically invites us to acknowledge the gulf between

nature's universal but attentively differentiating care and, on the other hand, the attitudes that typically manifest themselves in human behaviour. "Just imagine what would happen to the beauty of the meadow[,]" he laments, were we to suppose that "nature were us human beings—rigid, domineering, cold, partisan, small-minded, capricious"(WL, 270/SKS 9, 268). This contrast helps, *via negativa*, to specify what Kierkegaard thinks it means to love a person "according to the person's distinctiveness." This requires a kind of patient attentiveness to a person's own individuality: the kind of patience and attentiveness that is not shown, for example, by the "rigid and domineering" type who "lacks flexibility, lacks the pliability to comprehend others" and "demands his own from everyone, wants everyone to be transformed in his image, to be trimmed according to his pattern for human beings" (WL, 270/SKS 9, 268). In short, loving a person "according to their distinctiveness" involves avoiding encroaching upon their own reality as particular individuals.

Admittedly, it can be difficult to see how this focus on particularity and individuality is supposed to fit with Kierkegaard's conception of the universal, undiscriminating, impartial character of neighbour love. How can he have it both ways? We think it is helpful here to regard Kierkegaard as, in certain important respects, a post-Hegelian thinker. At one point in his discussion, he remarks on his central category as follows:

> The category "neighbor" is like the category "human being." Each one of us is a human being and then in turn the distinctive individual that he is in particular, but to be a human being is the fundamental category. (WL, 141/SKS 9, 143)

The context of this remark is Kierkegaard insistence that our intimate relationships, such as our friendships or marriages, are not exempt from the demands of neighbour love. While this does not require giving up their special place in our lives, he argues, we must learn to love our significant others, no less than anyone else, first and foremost as our neighbours. How then can he also say that "true love loves every human being according to [their] distinctiveness"(WL, 270/SKS 9, 269)? A plausible answer is that he conceives of the object of neighbour love not as something abstract or generic, such as human nature or personhood, but instead as particular individuals *in their distinctive ways of being human.* On this account, what—or rather, *whom*—one loves, when one loves one's neighbour, is neither abstract and generic nor anything like a "bare particular."[36] Whether in the context of intimate relationships or not, love's proper object is instead what Hegel would call the "concrete universal:" viz., humanity as it manifests itself in the life of a particular individual.[37]

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[36] *Pace* C. Stephen Evans, who in a different context associates Kierkegaard with the Scotist doctrine of *haecceity*. C. Stephen Evans, "Accountability to God in *The Sickness unto Death*: Kierkegaard's Relational Understanding of the Human Self," in *Kierkegaard's* The Sickness unto Death: *A Critical Guide*, eds. Jeffrey Hanson and Sharon Krishek (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 232.

[37] For a detailed case for Hegel's conception of the Concrete Universal, as needed for a satisfactory account of love's object, see Joe Saunders and Robert Stern, "The Individual as an Object of Love: The Property View of Love Meets the Hegelian View of Properties," *Ergo* 10, no. 12 (2023): 341-371. While Saunders and Stern focus on romantic love specifically, the approaches of Kierkegaard and Løgstrup support a view in which the notion of concrete universals is needed to make sense of the objects of neighbour love. Cf. Sharon Krishek's appeal to the notion of a person's "individual essence." Sharon Krishek, "The Long Journey to Oneself: The Existential Import of *The Sickness unto Death*," in *Kierkegaard's* The Sickness unto Death: *A Critical Guide*, eds. Jeffrey Hanson and Sharon Krishek (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

No doubt, Kierkegaard's view requires that contingent relational properties, such as being someone's spouse or friend, can be treated as secondary to what essentially belongs to one's distinctive way of being human.[38] On our reading, however, his view does *not* require that the value of humanity in an individual's life can be treated as somehow separate from their distinctive way of being human. Accordingly, to see one's neighbour in one's spouse or friend — or parent, say, or fellow citizen — is not to abstract away from their particularity as individuals: on the contrary, this requires attentiveness to how our common humanity uniquely manifests itself *in them*, where in principle this transcends their contingent roles and statuses.[39] Indeed, the importance of such attentiveness is clearly reflected in Kierkegaard's view of the role of "the duty to love the people we see," not least in contexts of friendship: where, "*in loving the actual individual person it is important that one does not substitute an imaginary idea of how we think or could wish that this person should be*" (WL, 159, 164/SKS 9, 160, 164).[40]

Løgstrup's approach is again concordant. For, he likewise argues that we often operate with general pictures of others and with general social norms, that, while legitimate within certain limits as making social life easier, if wrongly

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[39] Compare Iris Murdoch's description of love's object as this "contingent, messy, boundless, infinitely particular, endlessly still to be explained" creature that each of us are *qua* human. Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature,* eds. Peter Conradi and George Steiner (London: Penguin, 1997), 274. Arguably, his emphasis on how, in their ways of being human, individuals transcend the norms and institutions of substantial ethical life is the crux of Kierkegaard's dissatisfaction with Hegel's overall approach in this regard. But for a discussion of a certain instability within Hegel's own thought in this connection, see Thomas Khurana, "Politics of Second Nature: On the Democratic Dimension of Ethical Life," in *Philosophie der Republik*, eds. Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer and Benno Zabel (Tübingen: Mohr, 2018), 422-436.

[40] As exemplary of what it means to fulfil this duty, Kierkegaard cites Jesus' ongoing love for Peter, as Peter, despite the latter's denial of their relationship.

construed may blind us to others' individual natures and needs, leading to indifference. Thus, while Løgstrup distinguishes between social norms on the one hand and ethical relations between individuals on the other, he argues that we should see both as needed and as ultimately interrelated. In the ethical case, I have power over the well-being of a particular individual, in a concrete relationship between us – for example, someone who has trusted me for advice. In the social case, we are operating at a more general and therefore more abstract level – for example, acting to make sure our department gives our students sound guidance concerning various courses, which only require us to think about advising students in a fairly general way.[41] Given the nature of our practical worlds, both levels can be identified and are required. However, at the same time Løgstrup insists that the two levels should not really be conceived as utterly separate from each other, as both are ultimately aimed at care – so, for example, one cannot separate ethical and social norms by saying that the latter can simply be based on self-interest in a way that the former cannot.[42] Thus, taken on their own, "the social norms are simply not sufficient"[43] and must be related to the ethical demand, while the ethical demand will require relating to social norms when we engage with individuals in a wider context.

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[41] Løgstrup's own example is relating to one's children in a social order, making sure they attend school as required by law etc, and relating to your children ethically, such as considering when to respect their independence of your guidance and when not, which requires you to relate to *your* child in particular. Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 53-54.
[42] Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 52-55.
[43] Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 55.

So instead of drawing a complete division between them, Løgstrup suggests we should treat the social norm as a kind of "refraction" of the ethical demand:[44] just as white light can be refracted into a variety of colours, so the demand can take a variety of forms in the range of social conditions in which it is realized. For example, in thinking of how best to advise the students, I still see us as having power over them and their dependence on this advice, though in a more general and less personalised way. There is thus a higher degree of universality at this level, as I can think about students not as particular individuals but in a rather more unspecific way, so this reflection will not mean we engage directly with a concrete individual as we do in an ethical case – but nonetheless we should still think of students *as being* individuals from which our generalisation is an abstraction, rather than treating these students as just abstractions in themselves. If we fall into the latter attitude, Løgstrup warns, we will be tempted into a kind of universalizing thinking that puts individuality aside altogether, and so loses any connection to the ethical demand of any kind, so that the refractional relation between both will be lost in a highly problematic way.

For Løgstrup as for Kierkegaard, then, it is a false dichotomy to interpret the ethical significance of love either as the appreciation of certain abstract properties or

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[44] Cf. Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 91: "[T]he demand is, as it were, refracted through a prism in a variety of ways. In the first place are the various distinctive relationships in which we stand to one another—as spouses, parents and children, employer and employee, teacher and student, and so on. The demand is refracted through the spiritual content of these relationships, and since this is different from one people to another, and from one time to another, the refraction takes place in a great variety of ways. Care of a spouse's life involves different conduct under monogamy than polygamy, just as care for the life of a child required different actions in a patriarchal family and social structure than in family and social life today."

merely as the "celebration of particularity." On the approach they share, attending to the moral value of humanity in another is not just to see a value one must respect, but a vulnerable being who is in need but on whom one must not encroach. And this, in turn, requires attending to others in their concrete particularity.

Conclusion

Following Kierkegaard and Løgstrup, we have argued that, given our human interdependence, neighbour love must involve an aim, not just an object. We have argued that this aim will be care. We have also argued that this aim need not involve encroachment and that the case for this can be made out both in theological terms—as per Kierkegaard's conception of the role for God as the middle-term in well-ordered love—and in a more secular way—as per Løgstrup's conception of a person's will as a limit on the legitimate exercise of power over them. Finally, we have argued that love's aim will include attending to the particularity and individuality of love's object, a form of attention that can get lost when this aim is ignored. We conclude that the ethical tradition of Kierkegaard and Løgstrup offers a live and compelling alternative to broadly Kantian accounts of love and its place in moral life.[45]

[45] Our thanks to participants of the Kierkegaard and Love Workshop at Harvard and the Philosophy Research Seminar at Essex to which we presented earlier versions of this material. Thanks also to Ashton Wellsbury for his help with the references.

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