Essentially Preferential: A Critique of Kierkegaard’s Works of Love

Abstract

In Volume I of Works of Love, Kierkegaard condemns preferential, “earthly” love and extols the virtues of impartial, “Christian” love. Yet he claims that his vision of Christianity leaves room for earthly relationships in their full richness. Controversy over this claim is longstanding, but a number of contemporary scholars have come to Kierkegaard’s defense. In what follows, I attempt to counter this trend. I do so by criticizing a scholar who I take to be one of Kierkegaard’s most persuasive apologists – Jamie Ferreira. Drawing on recent work by Harry Frankfurt, I argue that essential to human love-relationships is their generation of preferential moral commitments. Ferreira’s defense of Kierkegaard is therefore inadequate; it shows only how Kierkegaardian Christianity leaves room for attention to distinct individuals, not how such distinctness can become morally relevant. Indeed, Kierkegaard’s ethic of selflessness specifically precludes this possibility, since partiality, he claims, is necessarily selfish. This claim I also dispute. If my argument succeeds, then, I will have shown not only that Kierkegaardian Christianity eliminates the possibility of loving earthly relationships, but also that it does so on inadequate grounds. I will conclude by briefly discussing the possibility of revising Kierkegaard’s account, taking as my example the amendments recently proposed by Sharon Krishek.

I.

In Volume I of Works of Love, Kierkegaard draws a distinction between “earthly love” and “Christian love.” The former, he claims, is fundamentally preferential; earthly friendship and romance consist in care for one person to the exclusion of others. Christian love, by contrast, excludes no one; the category of the neighbor encompasses all of humanity. Equipped with this distinction, Kierkegaard devotes much of Works of Love to criticizing earthly love and extolling the virtues of its Christian counterpart. Yet despite this project, he also makes clear that Christians need not abandon their friendships and romances. To the contrary, Kierkegaard maintains that his vision of Christianity leaves ample room for earthly relationships in their full richness.

Controversy over this claim, however, is longstanding. In 1939, Theodor Adorno published a critique of Works of Love in which he accused Kierkegaard of rendering the object of love too abstract and interchangeable to function viably in human relationships.¹ In the face of such charges, a number of contemporary critics have sought to defend Kierkegaard’s

consistency. In what follows, I attempt to counter this trend. I do so by criticizing a scholar who I take to be one of Kierkegaard’s most persuasive apologists – Jamie Ferreira. Drawing on recent work by Harry Frankfurt, I will argue that essential to human love-relationships is their generation of preferential moral commitments. Ferreira’s defense of Kierkegaard is therefore inadequate; it shows only how Kierkegaardian Christianity leaves room for attention to distinct individuals, not how such distinctness can become morally relevant. Indeed, Kierkegaard’s ethic of selflessness specifically precludes this possibility, since partiality, he claims, is necessarily selfish. This claim I will also dispute. If my argument succeeds, then, I will have shown not only that Kierkegaardian Christianity eliminates the possibility of loving earthly relationships, but also that it does so on inadequate grounds. I will conclude by briefly discussing the possibility of revising Kierkegaard’s account, taking as my example the amendments recently proposed by Sharon Krishek.

II. Throughout *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard describes and analyzes many differences between earthly love and Christian love. The former is immediate, the latter reflective; the former is finite, the latter eternal; the former is a natural event, the latter a solemn duty. Of these differences, however, none is more important to Kierkegaard’s overall project than this: earthly love is partial, whereas Christian love embraces every human being equally. This distinction receives its clearest elucidation in Chapter IIB, “Thou Shalt Love Thy Neighbor” (italics in the original). There, Kierkegaard explains that “earthly love is based on an impulse which, explained as affection, has its highest, its unqualified, its poetically unqualified exclusive expression in the fact that there is but one single object of love in the whole world” (41). Later, he uses the metaphor of blindness, which he employs in different contexts throughout the book, to make the same point: a lover, he says, can quickly become “blind to everything else but this beloved” (57). This blindness stems from earthly love’s roots in passion, which, for Kierkegaard, “fights in only one way: either-or: ‘either I exist and am the highest, or I do not exist at all, either all or nothing’” (41). Earthly love therefore results in a kind of tunnel-vision idolatry: the beloved becomes the lover’s sole focus, to which passion demands unconditional devotion.

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It is worth pausing to note that aspects of this characterization are quite dubious. First of all, throughout his discussion Kierkegaard casually lumps friendship and romantic love together – a conflation that muddies his concept of earthly love considerably. What’s more, he makes no mention of all other types of earthly love – for example, familial love, love for one’s country, and the affection born of long-time acquaintance.\(^3\) When these manifold types of earthly love are brought to mind, Kierkegaard’s remarks about it begin to seem sloppy. For example, while it is plausible, though by no means necessarily true, that romantic love culminates in a sense that there is only one object of love in the whole world, friendship quite obviously does not do so. Devoted friendship demands no exclusivity; to the contrary, many friendships grow deeper with the addition of other friends. C.S. Lewis explains this phenomena nicely: “in each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out… hence true Friendship is the least jealous of loves.”\(^4\) This lack of tunnel vision is even more obvious in the case of parental love, since parents with multiple children love each one without becoming blind to the others. Many of Kierkegaard’s other claims about earthly love are open to similar objections: for example, his claim that the immediacy of earthly love will flare up and quickly fade may apply to infatuation, but it does not apply to friendship, parenthood, or even the more stable, mature forms of romance.

Indeed, questions can be raised about Kierkegaard’s “either-or” account of passion in general. Does every passion truly demand either complete devotion or complete dismissal – as Kierkegaard puts it, “to be or not to be”? Such a strict dichotomy seems more like conceptual convenience than profundity. Passion can quickly become a false idol, yes, but surely it can also accept a more modest status; most stamp collectors are not pulled towards unconditional commitment to their stamps. On closer analysis, then, many of Kierkegaard’s claims about earthly love lose their bite.

Despite these objections, however, the core of Kierkegaard’s analysis remains sound: earthly love is indeed fundamentally partial – that is, it privileges some and excludes others. I love Mary and not Jane; a mother loves her child and not the kid down the block; I play poker (lovingly) with these three guys and not those three. Kierkegaard, however, goes a step farther, claiming that such partiality is in fact a form of selfishness, and that it should therefore be “pushed from the throne… in order to set spiritual love in its place” (37). I will examine Kierkegaard’s “demonstration” of this selfishness

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\(^3\) For a compelling catalogue of the distinctions between four types of love – affection, friendship, Eros, and charity – see C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1960). Lewis’s analysis displays a subtlety and substance conspicuously lacking from Kierkegaard’s.

later in this paper. For now, it is sufficient to note his use of it to draw a contrast with unselfish, Christian love, which “teaches love to all men, unconditionally all” (41). Such universality arises from Kierkegaard’s all-inclusive interpretation of the category of neighbor. “Neighbor,” says Kierkegaard, “is what philosophers would call the ‘other,’” and it therefore “implies ‘all men,’” for all men are equal before God and equally “other” in relation to the self. Thus, the morally relevant feature of our humanity is precisely that which is shared between all human beings – namely, the “essential other that is always glimpsed in every individual, that common to all, that eternal resemblance, that equality” (73). Unlike earthly love, then, Christian love is blind to differences between men, which are only temporal, earthly costumes that distract from our divine kinship. To illustrate this point, Kierkegaard compares human beings to sheets of paper, all bearing the same watermark, but inscribed with different words. He cautions us: “do not be confused by the different inscriptions, hold it up to the light, and then you see a common mark in them all” (73). This is the essential task of Christian love: to see through distinctions and love all men equally, in virtue of what all share equally.

This account of love has provoked the ire of critics throughout the 20th century, the most famous of whom was Theodor Adorno. In 1939, Adorno published an article entitled “On Kierkegaard’s Doctrine of Love,” as a follow-up to his 1933 book *Kierkegaard’s Construction of the Aesthetic*. Adorno’s critique of Kierkegaard is both famous and wide-ranging, and I will focus here only on one of its narrower aspects: the accusation that Kierkegaard renders the object of Christian love too abstract to retain its roots in the concrete world. This is a provocative claim, given Kierkegaard’s unceasing polemic against Hegelian abstraction and his passionate demand that philosophy remain rooted in existing particulars. Nevertheless, it has textual force. Kierkegaard does indeed, as Adorno claims, “reduce the neighbor to the general principle of otherness or the universal human,” thereby rendering the particular object of love entirely replaceable – a contingent fact ultimately irrelevant to the true Christian (Adorno 417). Indeed, Kierkegaard’s language makes this replaceability clear: “death cannot deprive you of your neighbor, for if it takes one, then life at once gives you another” (Kierkegaard 54), and “if you confuse another man with your neighbor, then in the last analysis there is no mistake” (Kierkegaard 43). Adorno argues that this conception does “demonic” violence to the true character of human relationships, in which the participants are precisely *irreplaceable*, at least to each other. What’s more, it deprives the Christian neighbor of “the concreteness which alone makes it possible to behave concretely towards him,” and that it ultimately leads to social passivity and maintenance of an oppressive, conformist order (Adorno 421). I propose to
set aside Adorno’s social critique; his discussion of human relationships, however, remains germane to our purposes.

Perhaps some readers familiar with Kierkegaard will expect him to accept the accusation that his account does violence to the character of human relationships. After all, human relationships are earthly relationships, and Kierkegaard is by no means known for his desire to accommodate the worldly status quo. On this view, Kierkegaardian Christianity could have all the unpleasant earthly consequences that Adorno suggests, yet still retain its divine authority. However, in *Works of Love* such an austere claim is not open to Kierkegaard, at least not in its full severity. Despite his constant warnings about the friction between Christianity and the world, Kierkegaard clearly states that his vision does not demand that the Christian abandon his earthly relationships: “[Christian love] will not lead you to cease to love the beloved, oh, far from it! For in that case, the word “neighbor” would be the greatest deception ever invented, if, in order to love your neighbor, you must start by giving up your love for those for whom you feel affection” (52). Kierkegaard makes similar statements throughout *Works of Love* (see, for example, 112-113). The selfishness of earthly relationships must be expunged, yes, but the relationships themselves may continue to flourish in their full richness. Adorno’s accusation to the contrary, then, does not simply lodge an external complaint; rather, it identifies a potential contradiction internal to the claims Kierkegaard makes about his own project.

A number of scholars have attempted to defend *Works of Love* against the threat of this contradiction.\(^5\) I will focus on the defense I find most persuasive: the interpretation proposed by M. Jamie Ferreira in her 1997 paper, “Equality, Impartiality, and Moral Blindness in Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love.*”\(^6\) Ferreira admits to Adorno that Kierkegaard’s discussion of the neighbor tends toward the abstract, but she claims that this abstraction is only one level of a multi-level discussion. Specifically, the category of “neighbor” is part of a “meta-level discussion of a rule” that serves to identify the boundaries (or lack thereof) of the community to which the moral law applies (Ferreira 83). On this level, Kierkegaard strictly prohibits any kind of exclusion; the demands of Christian love apply to all men unconditionally. However, on a different level – the “first-order discussion exemplifying applications” – all abstraction disappears, and Kierkegaard demands that the Christian love the concrete men she sees in a manner that responds to the needs particular to each (83). Indeed, the Christian has a duty to find these men lovable, despite their imperfections, and to cease comparing them to any

\(^5\) See, for example, Walsh, “Forming the Heart.”

\(^6\) Ferreira later expanded her interpretation into a whole book, entitled *Love’s Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard’s Works of Love* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001). I, however, will cite only the original article.
imaginary ideals. Such a duty allows for appreciation of diversity without the selfishness of preference. Ferreira cites Kierkegaard’s comparison between God’s love for men and his love for flowers in the field: “Recall the beauty of your field! There is no, oh, no difference in the love – but in the flowers, what a difference! … What love! First, it makes no distinctions, none at all; next, which is like the first, it makes infinite differences itself in loving the differences” (218). Appreciation of such differences, says Ferreira, makes room for expressions of non-exclusive love that are nevertheless tailored to particular people – specifically, the people “given” to a Christian in actuality (79-80).

This account is persuasive and textually well-grounded. However, I’d like to suggest that it nevertheless fails to carve out sufficient room within Kierkegaardian Christianity for the genuine human relationships that Kierkegaard wishes his Christian to maintain. The reader’s acceptance of this suggestion will depend on her acceptance of a particular claim about human relationships – namely, that they generate fundamentally preferential moral commitments. Such a claim is by no means uncontentious. The intuition that moral duty must be completely impartial runs deep, and whole traditions in ethics are devoted to hashing it out and codifying its consequences, either through a veil of ignorance, a categorical imperative, an impersonal evaluation of the best state of affairs, or some other formal mechanism for removing “arbitrary” privileging of one person over another. Kierkegaard, at least in Works of Love, seems to fall squarely within this tradition – curious company, given the Kantian/Rawlsian/Consequentialist tendency to abstract away from an existing human perspective and to try to see a situation from a “God’s-eye view.” In the Postscript, Kierkegaard disparages such attempts, at least when it comes to metaphysics. Works of Love, by contrast, suggests that his Christian ethics are a puzzlingly different story; as Kierkegaard’s language about imitating and resembling God’s impartiality makes clear, the goal of Christian love is to achieve, so to speak, a “God’s-eye view” – a standpoint that values each man equally.

I believe that such a standpoint, especially if treated superficially, is a misguided characterization of the moral perspective. This paper, however, is not the appropriate forum to thoroughly elucidate this belief. I will content myself with just one objection – the only one I believe necessary to show that Kierkegaard’s account is unable to function as he wants it to. This objection receives its most famous articulation in Bernard Williams’ article “Persons, "

JOSEPH CARLSMITH

Character, and Morality,” but I will also discuss the version of it given in Harry Frankfurt’s *The Reasons of Love*, the theme of which is more explicitly relevant to Kierkegaard’s project.

Williams and Frankfurt both cite the oft-discussed example of a man in a rowboat who is presented with the chance to save one of two people from drowning: his wife, or another woman he has never met. This example is meant to provoke the intuition that it is perfectly moral for the man to save his wife rather than the stranger, and that in fact he has a moral obligation to do so. Williams uses this intuition to make his famous “one thought too many” argument against utilitarianism and other impartial moral systems. He concludes his discussion with a claim with which Kierkegaard might readily agree: “deep attachments to other persons will express themselves in the world in ways that cannot at the same time embody the impartial point of view, and that they also run the risk of offending against it” (Williams 18).

Frankfurt takes this claim one step further. Not only will relationships express themselves via partiality, but such partiality is *essential* to genuine love for another human being: “Loving someone or something essentially means or consists in, among other things, taking its interests as reasons for acting to serve those interests. Love is itself, for the lover, a source of reasons” (Frankfurt 37). These reasons, Frankfort argues, justify our favoring “certain people over others who may be just as worthy but with whom our relationships are more distant” (35). For example, a father is and should be willing to pay much more for his daughter’s education than for the education of another child in a distant African country. Such favoritism does not commit the father to the belief that his child is inherently more valuable than the African child, for love need not be understood as a response to the perceived inherent value of its object (40). Rather, the father’s love for his daughter just is what makes her valuable *to him*. It thereby generates a preferential moral commitment to his daughter’s well-being; he has duties to act on behalf of his daughter that do not apply to other children. Such preferential duties, says Frankfurt, are generated by any loving relationship.

This claim is quite intuitive. I have duties to my friends that I do not have to strangers, duties to my wife that I do not have to yours. Indeed, Frankfurt’s claim comes very close to Kierkegaard’s own analysis of earthly relationships as rooted in preference. The difference is that Kierkegaard thinks that those earthly relationships can continue to exist and flourish with the preference they manifest eradicated. Frankfurt would disagree. It is *essential* to loving human relationships that they generate preferential moral commitments; Kierkegaard’s baby cannot be saved from its earthly bathwater.

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If we accept Frankfurt’s account, then, it should be clear that Ferreira’s multi-leveled interpretation cannot procure Kierkegaard the space for earthly relationships that he claims. Ferreira shows only how the Christian, in order to respond to the concrete needs of the people he sees, can be allowed to appreciate and to attend to the distinctions between them. She does nothing to show how such distinctions could become morally relevant. Thus, you are permitted to give more money to the beggar than the businessman, you are even permitted to devote yourself to specific causes rather than attempting to help everyone equally, but you are not permitted, in doing so, to manifest preferential commitment towards some to the exclusion of others. Put simply, Ferreira’s Kierkegaard can make space for concrete human relationships only by robbing them of their ethical dimensions. Essential humanity, shared equally by all, is the sole locus of moral value, and moral duty in relationships arises only on that basis. As Kierkegaard puts it, “primarily your wife must be your neighbor” (115); though you may have special affection for her, you must guard constantly against the threat of that affection motivating some kind of preferential treatment – for example, a choice to save her while a stranger drowns. On Frankfurt’s view, though, such preference is essential. If Christianity prohibits it, then it prohibits genuine love between husband and wife. That Kierkegaard wishes to maintain such love, then, commits him to the contradiction that Adorno suggests and that Ferreira tries in vain to rebuff.9

As this discussion makes clear, Kierkegaard’s strict prohibition on preferential love renders his account unable to achieve its own ambitions. Given the problems it creates, then, this crippling prohibition demands critical scrutiny. Such scrutiny is the task of the remainder of this paper – an investigation that reveals, I submit, serious weaknesses in the arguments supporting Kierkegaard’s prohibition.

III.

Kierkegaard makes the basis of his condemnation quite clear: preferential love, he says, is actually a disguised form of self-love. Thus, since “Christian love is self-denying love,” it must also be strictly incompatible with preferential love (43). Note that this formulation already introduces ambiguity into the argument, for Kierkegaard’s portrayal of “self-love” is notoriously difficult to pin down. In some places, he seems to equate self-love simply with the selfish pursuit of your own interests, and to condemn it on that basis

9 Krishek makes a similar point against Ferreira, though she interprets Kierkegaard himself as committed to the idea that preference is essential to earthly relationships (Krishek 120-129), whereas I draw on an independent account. Krishek’s conclusion is slightly stronger, but given Kierkegaard’s explicit statements about eradicating preference from earthly relationships, I am not convinced.
(see, for example, 41-43). In others, however, he suggests that self-love should be the goal of a Christian, and that many selfish men fail to achieve it (19-20). In this context, self-love seems to mean something like “concern for one’s true, worthy interests” – the kind of love Jesus directs us to have for your neighbors. This interpretation results in the peculiarly empty formulation, “You shall love yourself as you love your neighbor when you love him as yourself” (19). This I take to mean that you should love yourself in virtue of your essential humanity, just as you should love your neighbor in virtue of his. But Kierkegaard cannot be accusing preferential love of being this kind of self-love in disguise, or else the contrast with Christian love disintegrates. Thus, I will interpret him as arguing that preferential love is essentially self-loving in the selfish, damnable sense, not self-loving in the disinterested, honorable sense. Inattention to this distinction results in confusion.10

Kierkegaard gives an assortment of “demonstrations” to prove the selfishness of preferential love. Unfortunately, the relationship between these various demonstrations is never made explicit, so to address them effectively I will group them into two rough categories. In the first category are Kierkegaard’s attempts to prove that preferential love is in fact motivated by the benefits it accrues for the lover – i.e. that the preferential lover is using the beloved for his own purposes. For example, Kierkegaard cites how lovers derive self-esteem from the beloved (46), how the beloved is “intoxicating” (46), how admiration strives after reciprocation (45), and, most damningly, how many lovers see their beloved as (gasp) tremendously important to them – a form of grasping manifested both by lovers’ latent jealousies and by their constant poetic gushings about how they would die if their beloved left them (45). Kierkegaard takes such phenomena as demonstrating that preferential love is necessarily selfish.

The problems with this category of argument are manifold. First of all, many of the phenomena Kierkegaard cites are purely contingent features of

10 Indeed, I have offered only one, fairly rough interpretation of Kierkegaard’s different types of self-love – an interpretation I think sufficiently developed for the purposes of this paper. Controversy over these distinctions, however, remains spirited. Ferreira, for example, divides Kierkegaardian self-love into two kinds, roughly akin to the two I have proposed: “a ‘selfish,’ exclusive love of self, which is at odds with the good of the other, and a “proper,” inclusive love of self, which both encompasses the good of the other and is the measure of the good of the other” (Ferreira (2001), 35). What exactly she means by “is the measure of the good of the other,” I am not sure, so I have opted for a slightly looser interpretation. Krishek, however, would disagree with both of us. She proposes a three-fold division: between selfish self-love, proper qualified self-love, and proper unqualified self-love (see Krishek 116). I have neither the space nor the need to parse these distinctions adequately here. Those interested may consult the discussions in Love’s Grateful Striving and Kierkegaard on Faith and Love.
preferential love. Jealousy, possessiveness, melodrama, and boosts in self-esteem are connected to preferential love only via Kierkegaard’s quasi-empirical psychologizing, not via any sort of structural or conceptual necessity. This opens Kierkegaard up to an easy line of attack: counter examples. Many lovers are not jealous; take, for example, Anodos in George MacDonald’s *Phantastes*, who loves his princess so much that he willingly surrenders her to a man he knows to be better than himself.11 Neither are lovers necessarily possessive; C. S. Lewis, for example, wrote after his wife died that “if I knew that to be eternally divided from her and eternally forgotten by her would add a greater joy and splendor to her being, of course I’d say, ‘Fire ahead.’ Just as if, on earth, I could have cured her cancer by never seeing her again, I’d have arranged never to see her again.”12 Lewis, admittedly, was a deeply committed Christian, but he was not thinking of his wife in terms of the essential, shared humanity that Kierkegaard would demand. Nevertheless, his are not the sentiments of a man who loves his wife solely for his own benefit. Such examples, I believe, are countless.

What’s more, even if no such specific cases were forthcoming, Kierkegaard’s conclusion would not follow from the evidence he presents. Recall the classic, almost childishly simple refutation of psychological egoism, that ethical worldview so popular amongst high-school sophomores and so difficult to eradicate in stubborn interlocutors. The psychological egoist argues that every action is done for selfish reasons. To prove this, he searches for the tiniest sliver of benefit an actor receives from an action, and elevates that benefit to the status of the motive of the action. For example:

Normal Person: “That soldier just jumped on a grenade to save his platoon. How heroic!”

Psychological Egoist: “Yes, but he got a posthumous medal. Thus, he must have done it for the sake of the posthumous medal. He is selfish.”

The response here is obvious: just because someone derives benefit from an action does not mean he does it for the sake of that benefit. The soldier got a medal, yes, but the purpose of his action was not to get the medal, but to save his platoon. We can reason similarly in response to Kierkegaard. Most lovers do indeed derive benefits from their love – indeed, Kierkegaard cites only the pettiest of these benefits – but that does nothing to prove that the love itself is selfishly motivated. Frankfurt makes this point eloquently in his discussion of

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JOSEPH CARLSMITH

a case strikingly reminiscent of the ones Kierkegaard complains about. He imagines a man who declares to his wife that his love for her gives meaning and value to his life (Frankfurt 60). Assuming the man is sincere, Frankfurt observes, “the fact that loving her is so important to him is entirely consistent with his being unequivocally wholehearted and selfless in his devotion to her interests” (60). Indeed, it precisely the selfless character of his love that makes it so meaningful (61). To such an observation, Kierkegaard’s first category of argument can offer no riposte. Both counterexamples and conceptual clarity make clear, then, that Kierkegaard’s attempts to prove the selfishness of preferential love via its benefits for the lover must be deemed inconclusive at best.

However, Kierkegaard also provides a second category of argument, this one both more interesting and, to some, more persuasive. The basic thought is this: yes, a preferential lover is genuinely devoted to his beloved, but that beloved has become another “I” rather than a genuine “other,” thus transforming the lover’s devotion, despite its pretensions to selflessness, into a perverse form of self-love (44-45). Note that this argument seems at odds with the one just discussed: it admits the genuine devotion that the first set of arguments seeks to undermine. Perhaps a more discerning critic could parse the subtle harmony between the two. My best guess is that Kierkegaard did not see the two as especially distinct, since it all comes down to self-love in the end. Given the objections just discussed, however, it would be more charitable to consider this latter argument on its own terms.

“At the supreme apex of earthly love and friendship,” Kierkegaard claims, “the two actually become one self, one I” (47). What’s more, “the more closely the two I’s cling together to form one I, the more this united self selfishly excludes all others” (47). If this claim is correct, it is indeed a potentially damning characterization of preferential love: as Ferreira puts it, “there is no genuine relationship because there are not two selves to be in relation” (68). The problem is that Kierkegaard provides very little to persuade us of his claim’s accuracy, relying mostly on his reader’s intuition and on the fact that many lovers claim a kind of mystical union with their beloved. For example, in a much later chapter on how “Love Seeketh Not Its Own,” Kierkegaard quotes an imaginary lover who declares that “everything which is mine is his… and what is his is… is mine!” (216, ellipses in the original). Such an “our” functions, for Kierkegaard, exactly as the possessive “mine” of the individual. Two egos have united to form one, but they remain egotistical nonetheless. This union prevents the kind of other-directedness that is necessary for real selflessness. For Kierkegaard, such direction can be achieved only through love for the “neighbor,” who remains wholly “other” despite his essential similarity (47).

But the claim that preferential love requires “union” with the beloved rests on a confusion. Certainly, for the preferential lover, the interests of the
beloved generate *reasons* for the lover to act. But such generation does not entail that the lover no longer see his beloved as distinct from himself; it is quite possible to care about someone else’s well-being without mistaking it for your own. The experience of love itself, I believe, makes this quite clear: I love my mother deeply; I would do much, almost anything, to protect her and to keep her safe; but I certainly do not take myself to be protecting *myself* in doing so – indeed, many situations would demand that I do quite the opposite. Now, Kierkegaard could dispute this intuition (perhaps by arguing that subconsciously, I am identifying my mother with myself), but it is at least as substantively grounded as his own. What’s more, the linguistic evidence he adduces to support his case is flimsy at best. First, a smattering of gushy quotations is a poor foundation for any philosophy. Secondly, though some lovers may speak of the beloved as an extension of the self, many do not. Take, for example, e.e. cummings, who writes that his lover is “somewhere I have never traveled, gladly beyond/ any experience.”13 For many, such profound “otherness” is precisely the phenomenological character of loving relationship; love brings you face to face with someone emphatically not you, someone you can never possess or capture or appropriate. Again, this is an experience, not an argument, but I believe that it is vivid for many people, and that its force and prevalence push back on Kierkegaard’s characterization of preferential love as ego-union.

But we need not rely on such experiences to buttress our critique, for there is a more substantive argument to be made – one internal to Kierkegaard’s project. It can’t be the case that the beloved’s generating reasons for the lover requires ego-union, because neighbor love, on Kierkegaard’s view, *also* generates reasons based on its object’s interests, and Kierkegaard is quite clear that neighbor-love is directed at a genuine “other.” After all, despite Kierkegaard’s bluster about neighbor love as “spiritual love” and earthly love as “sensuall-psychically-spiritually defined,” they both involve care and investment in the well-being of their object (47). The distinction between the two is primarily that preferential love gets its reasons from a finite number of objects, whereas neighbor love does not. But this distinction is just the distinction between partiality and impartiality. Thus, it cannot be used to prove the selfishness of partiality without begging the question.

IV.

As this discussion makes clear, neither Kierkegaard’s first category of argument (that earthly love uses its object for selfish benefit) nor his second

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category (that earthly love makes its object into another “I”) stand up to
critical scrutiny. His rationale for prohibiting preferential love is thus on
shaky ground. Unfortunately, this is one of the founding tenants of his entire
project; to lose confidence in it is to lose confidence in much of Works of
Love as whole. But there is an upside. Recall that Kierkegaard’s prohibition
on preference was precisely what eliminated the possibility of his account
making space for genuine human relationships. Toss out this prohibition, and
we may be able to salvage Kierkegaard’s vision of Christian love in a manner
compatible with the preferential commitments essential to friendship,
parenthood, marriage, and other forms of earthly love.

To illustrate this possibility, I’d like to briefly discuss Sharon Krishek’s
account of the relationship between preferential and Christian love. Krishek
agrees with the core tenants of the critique proposed in the first part of this
paper: that earthly relationships are essentially preferential, and thus that
Kierkegaard’s desire to make room for them countenances a contradiction in
the text of Works of Love. Krishek, however, thinks that this contradiction is
resolvable if we amend Kierkegaard’s account to reflect “what he should have
said” rather than what he did in fact say (139). Such a resolution comes, for
Krishek, by applying concepts from Fear and Trembling – in particular, the
“movement of resignation” and the “movement of repetition” – to the themes
of Works of Love. She maps the “movement of resignation” onto Works of
Love’s discussion of self-denial; in resignation, we deny our finite, corporeal
self, realize the otherness and equality of the people surrounding us, and focus
completely on them and on the infinite (Krishek 147-50). But such
resignation is not enough; Works of Love suffers from ambivalence, says
Krishek, because Kierkegaard forgets resignation’s counterpart – “the
movement of repetition: a movement that affirms the self, and the self’s
preferential tendencies, while incorporating the movement of resignation and
self-denial” (161). These two movements, says Krishek, combine to provide
the essential structure of faithful love. Non-preferentiality, realized through
resignation, is only one aspect of this structure – the aspect that neighborly
love focuses on. Preferential love, by contrast, focuses on another, equally
valid aspect – the personal value of the beloved, affirmed through repetition
(159). These two focuses can comfortably coexist; you may love your wife as
especially valuable to you, and yet still affirm the independent, impersonal
value of your neighbors.

This is a somewhat hasty gloss of a detailed and subtle account, but
thorough discussion is not necessary – I mention Krishek only to illustrate the
possibility of developing Kierkegaard-inspired analyses of love that
nevertheless make room for preference. Such accounts, however, do not
amount to “defenses” of Kierkegaard as such; Krishek distances her account
explicitly from Kierkegaard’s own, using his own concepts in a way that he
failed to. Indeed, at times she portrays Kierkegaard’s problems as too easily
solved. For example, according to Krishek, Kierkegaard’s condemnation of preference as selfish derives primarily from preferential love’s roots in the self’s immediacy: “Kierkegaard,” she says, “considers those elements (‘feelings, drives, inclinations, and passions … the powers of immediacy’) to constitute the selfishness that distinguishes between preferential love and neighborly love, because they are indeed concerned exclusively with the self and its gratification” (114). Such a view of Kierkegaard’s argument leads naturally to Krishek’s solution: the use of repetition to reaffirm the self’s concrete existence. But this view is too narrow. In Works of Love, the self’s finite immediacy is not the only thing that renders preferential love selfish; rather, as we have seen, Kierkegaard gives multiple, disparate justifications for this conclusion, which I have grouped into two categories – that preferential love uses the beloved for selfish purposes, and that preferential love makes the beloved into another “I.” Even if we stretch Krishek’s proposal to address the entire first category, the second remains unanswered. Thus, if the movement of repetition were introduced into Works of Love, the “another ‘I’” argument would still create friction between the amended account and the original, and it would need to be either transformed or eliminated in order to make space for non-selfish preference – a project Krishek does not attempt. Of course, as I have already stated, I think the “another ‘I’” argument fallacious; that Krishek fails to address it, though, further illustrates the distance between Kierkegaard’s account and her own. Nevertheless, projects like Krishek’s show much promise. We should feel free to harvest from Kierkegaard what insight we can about the nature of love, and to amend, transform, or discard the rest. Indeed, Krishek displays more allegiance to Kierkegaard than I feel necessary, claiming that her account is “consistent and faithful to the inner harmony of his own ideas,” even if it contradicts the account he actually gave (139). This assertion is both strong and, given the criticism I just suggested, somewhat questionable. My own view, though, is that such concern for interpretive fidelity is misplaced. If a Kierkegaard-inspired account is “faithful to the inner harmony of his ideas,” all the better. If not, though, it should be able to stand on its own legs.

References
