

# Self-Love and Neighbor-Love in Kierkegaard's Ethics

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## *Abstract*

Kierkegaard faces a dilemma. On the one hand, he endorses the biblical command to love our neighbors as ourselves. As such, he thinks self-love and neighbor-love should be symmetrical, similar in kind as well as degree. On the other hand, he recommends relating to others and ourselves differently. We are to be lenient, charitable, and forgiving when dealing with others; the opposite when dealing with ourselves. To resolve this tension, I argue that being more stringent with ourselves is not a moral ideal for Kierkegaard. It is a gambit designed to rehabilitate us from our tendency toward the opposite extreme.

## *Introduction*

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle claims the virtuous person regards a friend as “another self.”<sup>1</sup> He thereby implies love for one’s friends and for oneself should be more or less symmetrical, similar in kind as well as degree.<sup>2</sup> A comparable idea, but with expanded scope, arises in the well-known biblical directive to “love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>3</sup> It too suggests we should love others and ourselves in roughly equal fashion.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1166a30-1166a32. See also Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* 1245a29-1245a30; Pseudo-Aristotle, *Magna Moralia* 1213a11-1213a13.

<sup>2</sup> Julia Annas, “Self-Love in Aristotle,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 27, no. S1, 1989, pp. 1-18.

<sup>3</sup> Lv 19:18. The idea is central to all three Abrahamic faiths. Rabbi Hillel says the injunction to love your neighbor as yourself summarizes the Torah (b. Shabbat 31a). Jesus declares the saying encapsulates the teachings of the Law and the Prophets (Mt 7:12; cf. Mk 12:31). Finally, several hadith

Certain strands of ethical thought, often Christian in origin, reject this notion.<sup>5</sup> They foreswear symmetry between self-love and neighbor-love. We are to love our neighbors *more*. As various scriptural passages aver, we ought to consider other people better than ourselves and judge them less harshly.<sup>6</sup> We should willingly serve them—even lay down our lives for them.<sup>7</sup>

Both traditions find expression in Søren Kierkegaard's work. On the one hand, he embraces the “as” of the famous commandment. He insists we should love ourselves the same way we do our neighbors.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, he recommends relating to others and ourselves in disparate fashions. We should be lenient, charitable, and forgiving when dealing with others; the opposite when dealing with ourselves. A “heightened inequality” exists here, he declares.<sup>9</sup>

How do these two positions fit together? My aim is to solve this puzzle. I begin by exploring its nuances, including the specific way it arises in Kierkegaard's writings. I then consider handling it by appealing to Gene Outka's idea that equal love does not entail identical treatment. After rejecting this solution, I offer my own: Asymmetry between self-love and neighbor-love is not a moral ideal for Kierkegaard but a rehabilitative strategy. He counsels us to be more latitudinarian with others than

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collections quote Muhammad as making analogous proclamations (Sahih Bukhari, bk. 2, no. 12; Sahih Muslim, bk. 1, no. 72). See Oddbjørn Leirvik, “Aw qāla: ‘Li-jārihi’: Some Observations on Brotherhood and Neighborly Love in Islamic Tradition,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2010, pp. 357-372.

<sup>4</sup> Equal regard for all people is often seen as the crux of the love commandment. See Stephen J. Pope, “‘Equal Regard’ versus ‘Special Relations’? Reaffirming the Inclusiveness of Agape,” *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 77, no. 3, 1997, p. 353; Gene Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1977, pp. 9-24.

<sup>5</sup> For canonical Christian defenses of this position, see Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. by Philip S. Watson, Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press 1953; Richard Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2 vols., New York: Charles Scribner's Sons 1949; Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press 1950. For a secular defense, see W. G. Maclagan, “Self and Others: A Defence of Altruism,” *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 15, 1954, pp. 109-127.

<sup>6</sup> Mt 7:1-5; Lk 6:42; Rm 2:1; Ph 2:3-4; Jm 4:12.

<sup>7</sup> Jn 15:13; Ph 2:5-8; 1 Jn 3:16.

<sup>8</sup> SKS 9, 30 / WL, 23.

<sup>9</sup> SKS 9, 375 / WL, 382.

with ourselves in order to correct against a common tendency toward the opposite extreme.

### *I. Proper and Improper Self-Love*

Self-love is subject to a range of value judgments.<sup>10</sup> Some have seen it as a positive thing. Aristotle considered self-esteem beneficial for the good of friendship.<sup>11</sup>

Augustine regarded concern for one's own true good as the cornerstone of Christian life.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, others have viewed self-love as something negative. John Calvin called it a noxious pest.<sup>13</sup> Anders Nygren thought people should rid themselves of it entirely.<sup>14</sup>

We must not trivialize this dispute, as it often reflects deeper disagreements. But to some degree the quarrel is merely verbal. We go a long way toward resolving it if we draw a distinction, found already in Aristotle but present also in Kierkegaard, between proper and improper self-love.<sup>15</sup> Condemnations of self-love usually concern

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<sup>10</sup> As Thomas Aquinas says, "In one sense self-love is something all men have in common; in another it is something peculiar to the good; and in still another, something peculiar to the wicked" (*Summa Theologiae*, vol. 34, ed. and trans. By R. J. Batten O.P., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006, II-II, q. 25, a. 7). For more robust taxonomies, see Oliver O'Donovan, *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine*, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers 2006, pp. 1-9; Outka, *Agape*, pp. 55-74; Edward Collins Vacek S. J., *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics*, Washington, D. C.: Georgetown University Press 1994, pp. 205-208; Darlene Fozard Weaver, *Self Love and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, pp. 47-77.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* 1240a4-1240b37.

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Augustine, *City of God*, trans. by Henry Bettenson, New York: Penguin Books 1984, sec. XIX.14; Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. by D. W. Robertson, Jr., Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall 1958, sec. I.26.27. See also O'Donovan, *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine*, pp. 37-59.

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by Henry Beveridge, London: Bonham Norton 1599, bk. III.7.4.

<sup>14</sup> *Agape and Eros*, pp. 100f. and pp. 130-132. Nygren's basic position has become commonplace. As Harry Frankfurt notes, many consider self-love entirely pernicious because it "makes it impossible for us to devote ourselves sufficiently and in a suitable way...to other things that we love or that it would be good for us to love" (*The Reasons of Love*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2006, p. 71).

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1168b10-1169a17. See SKS 9, 26 / WL, 18. SKS 9, 30f. / WL, 22f. SKS 9, 59f. / WL, 53. SKS 9, 152 / WL, 151. See M. Jamie Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving: A*

its *improper* form, what we associate with selfishness, self-centeredness, and pride.<sup>16</sup>

Affirmations of self-love typically have to do with its *proper* form, what we connect *inter alia* with having a healthy regard for one's own well-being or considering oneself to be of intrinsic moral value.<sup>17</sup>

The distinction between proper and improper self-love bears on my project. There is no problem for Kierkegaard if he advocates asymmetry between neighbor-love and *improper* self-love. Of course we are not to love our neighbor as we do ourselves when we love ourselves wrongly; we are to love our neighbor as we do ourselves when we love ourselves rightly. A difficulty arises for Kierkegaard, then, only if he promotes asymmetry between neighbor-love and *proper* self-love. Accordingly, I will focus my attention here.

## *II. Asymmetry between Self-Love and Neighbor-Love*

At the most abstract level, I have no argument with Kierkegaard. He construes proper self-love as promotion of one's own true good. He identifies this good with love of

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*Commentary on Kierkegaard's Works of Love*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001, pp. 31-36; M. Jamie Ferreira, "The Problematic Agapeistic Ideal—Again," in *Ethics, Love, and Faith in Kierkegaard*, ed. by Edward F. Mooney, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 2008, pp. 97f.; M. Jamie Ferreira, "Rethinking Hatred of Self: A Kierkegaardian Exploration," in *Why Kierkegaard Matters: A Festschrift in Honor of Robert L. Perkins*, ed. by Marc A. Jolley and Edmon L. Rowell Jr., Macon, GA: Mercer University Press 2010, pp. 124-127; Sharon Krishek, *Kierkegaard on Faith and Love*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009, pp. 115-118; John Lippitt, "True Self-Love and True Self-Sacrifice," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 66, no. 3, 2009, pp. 125-138.

<sup>16</sup> Lippitt, "True Self-Love and True Self-Sacrifice," pp. 127-129; Outka, *Agape*, pp. 56-63. Some refuse to categorize selfishness and the like as even corrupted self-love; see Robert Merrihew Adams, "Self-Love and the Vices of Self-Preference," *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 15, no. 4, 1998, pp. 502-509; Erich Fromm, "Selfishness and Self-Love," *Psychiatry*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1939, pp. 520f.

<sup>17</sup> See Ferreira, "Rethinking Hatred of Self: A Kierkegaardian Exploration," pp. 124-126, 129; Fromm, "Selfishness and Self-Love," p. 520; O'Donovan, *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine*, pp. 2-4; Outka, *Agape*, pp. 63-74; Weaver, *Self Love and Christian Ethics*, pp. 56-61.

God.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, he describes proper neighbor-love as promotion of the neighbor's true good, which he also equates with love of God. He asserts, "To love God is to love oneself truly; to help another person to love God is to love another person; to be helped by another person to love God is to be loved."<sup>19</sup>

Interestingly, Kierkegaard adds that God does not ask anything for himself. God requests that we express love for Him by caring for our fellow human beings:

A person should begin with loving the unseen, God.... But that he actually loves the unseen will be known by his loving the brother he sees.... If you want to show that your life is intended to serve God, then let it serve people.... God does not have a share in existence in such a way that he asks for his share for himself; he asks for everything, but as you bring it to him you immediately receive, if I may put it this way, a notice designating where it should be delivered further, because God does not ask for anything for himself.<sup>20</sup>

What this means is that promoting someone's true good does not merely involve building up his or her religious virtues. It consists in helping the person cultivate his or her moral character as well. Of course, this point holds for self and neighbor alike. As yet, then, we find no asymmetry between self-love and neighbor-love in Kierkegaard's ethics.

The problem I have in mind comes into focus when we think about the matter more concretely. How in particular are we to go about promoting our own welfare?

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<sup>18</sup> SKS 9, 111 / WL, 107. See also SKS 5, 297 / EUD, 303. SKS 10, 198f. / CD, 188f. Here Kierkegaard falls in line with the classical tradition of Christian eudaemonism. For accounts of Christian eudaemonism, see O'Donovan, *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine*, pp. 37-59; Weaver, *Self Love and Christian Ethics*, pp. 3-4. For interpretations of Kierkegaard as a eudaemonist, see Gregory R. Beabout and Brad Frazier, "A Challenge to the 'Solitary Self' Interpretation of Kierkegaard," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2000, pp. 75-98; C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004, pp. 182f. For an attack on eudaemonist readings of Kierkegaard, see Ronald M. Green, *Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 1992, pp. 100f.

<sup>19</sup> SKS 9, 111 / WL, 107. See also SKS 9, 113 / WL, 109. SKS 9, 118 / WL, 114. SKS 9, 124 / WL, 121. See also Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, pp. 182-184.

<sup>20</sup> SKS 9, 161 / WL, 160f.; see Jn 21:15-17.

And how exactly should we tackle the project of furthering the neighbor's good? As we shall see, Kierkegaard answers these two questions in divergent ways.<sup>21</sup>

### *II.A. Loving Our Neighbor*

Kierkegaard's most robust account of how to relate to our neighbors occurs in *Works of Love*. He first and foremost recommends adopting an optimistic attitude: We ought to believe the best about people. We should assume they act out of concern for others, not mere self-interest. He writes, "*Love builds up by presupposing that love is present.*"<sup>22</sup> And elsewhere: "But what, then, is love? Love is to presuppose love; to have love is to presuppose love in others; to be loving is to presuppose that others are loving."<sup>23</sup>

Kierkegaard also exhorts us to undertake the complementary task of disregarding others' moral and religious failings.<sup>24</sup> He draws a disanalogy between the mindset we must have and that of the criminal detective.<sup>25</sup> The detective operates with a hermeneutics of suspicion. He or she hunts down clues of people's wrongdoing, inspecting whether even apparently insignificant things disclose sinister behavior.<sup>26</sup> Our assignment, by contrast, is to ignore the potential guilt or sinfulness

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<sup>21</sup> The asymmetry I find here is related but distinct from the one Theodor Adorno famously addresses. Adorno criticizes Kierkegaard for eschewing reciprocity, for calling us to love others whether or not they love us in return. Thus, he focuses on the asymmetry between how we treat others and how they treat us. My focus is the asymmetry between how we treat others and how we treat ourselves. See Theodor W. Adorno, "On Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1939, pp. 413-429. For a response to Adorno's criticism, see M. Jamie Ferreira, "Asymmetry and Self-Love: The Challenge to Reciprocity and Equality," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 1998, pp. 41-59; Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, pp. 209-227.

<sup>22</sup> *SKS* 9, 225 / *WL*, 222; emphasis in the original.

<sup>23</sup> *SKS* 9, 225 / *WL*, 223.

<sup>24</sup> *SKS* 5, 70 / *EUD*, 60. *SKS* 9, 280 / *WL*, 282. *SKS* 12, 295 / *WA*, 181.

<sup>25</sup> *SKS* 9, 289-292 / *WL*, 291-294.

<sup>26</sup> Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, p. 169 and p. 173.

of our neighbors.<sup>27</sup> We should not simply *wait* to pick out the proverbial splinters in others' eyes until we have removed the logs from our own.<sup>28</sup> We should not even look for the splinters. Kierkegaard quips, "The log in your own eye is neither more nor less than seeing and condemning the splinter in your brother's eye."<sup>29</sup>

Of course, sometimes it proves difficult to presuppose love in others and to overlook their transgressions. Kierkegaard's guiding maxim in these situations is "love hides a multitude of sins."<sup>30</sup> Several strategies fall under this heading. One is to furnish mitigating explanations for our neighbor's behavior, to interpret his or her words and actions in the best possible light. Hopefully we will thereby come to view any given misdeed as less of one, or not one at all.<sup>31</sup> Should this procedure become untenable in practice, we must simply forgive the person.<sup>32</sup> "The mitigating explanation wrests something away from the multitude by showing that this and that were not sin. Forgiveness removes what cannot be denied to be sin. Thus love strives in every way to hide a multitude of sins; but forgiveness is the most notable way."<sup>33</sup>

## *II.B. Loving Ourselves*

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<sup>27</sup> See SKS 7, 291-295 / *CUPI*, 320-323.

<sup>28</sup> See Mt 7:3-5; Lk 6:41-42.

<sup>29</sup> SKS 9, 375 / *WL*, 382. See Ferreira, "Asymmetry and Self-Love," p. 55.

<sup>30</sup> SKS 9, 286 / *WL*, 289; 1 P 4:7-12. For other discussions of how "love hides a multitude of sins," see SKS 5, 65-77 / *EUD*, 55-68. SKS 5, 78-86 / *EUD*, 69-78. SKS 12, 293-302 / *WA*, 179-188.

<sup>31</sup> SKS 9, 289-292 / *WL*, 291-294

<sup>32</sup> SKS 9, 291-294 / *WL*, 294-297. Forgiving someone makes sense when we are ones who have been injured. It is out of order when the action harms a third party. I can properly forgive only harms inflicted upon me. Thus, when faced with a transgression against a third party for which we cannot supply a mitigating explanation, another tactic Kierkegaard recommends becomes appropriate, namely remaining silent (SKS 9, 286-289 / *WL*, 289-291). Admittedly, refusing to speak up in such situations also sometimes seems wrong. I address this point in section VII.

<sup>33</sup> SKS 9, 291f. / *WL*, 294.

When it comes to loving ourselves, Kierkegaard backs an entirely different approach. We should not work toward our true good—our moral and religious perfection—by being optimistic about ourselves. We ought not to presuppose the best: selfless motivations and altruistic agendas. We must proceed pessimistically, constantly doubting our moral and religious prowess. “Earnestness,” Kierkegaard declares, “is precisely this kind of honest distrust of oneself, to treat oneself as a suspicious character.”<sup>34</sup>

As the preceding quotation suggests, the analogy to criminal investigation is once more in play. But Kierkegaard adopts the opposite position this time around. He embraces it:

Guilty? Not guilty? This is the earnest question in legal proceedings. This same question is even more earnest in concern about oneself, for if the authorities force their way into the most hidden nooks of the house in order to apprehend the guilty person, concern about oneself forces its way further than any judge does in order to find the guilt, into the heart’s most secret nook.<sup>35</sup>

The thrust of this passage is that, rather than willfully ignoring our own wrongdoings, we should seek them out. We must struggle to become aware of our guilt and conscious of our sins.<sup>36</sup> In a sense, Kierkegaard’s entire authorship underscores this ideal. He ceaselessly prods us to examine the purity of our hearts, the selflessness of our loves, and the unconditionality of our devotion to God.

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<sup>34</sup> *SKS* 13, 70 / *FSE*, 44.

<sup>35</sup> *SKS* 8, 363 / *UD*, 266.

<sup>36</sup> E.g. *SKS* 5, 397 / *TD*, 15. *SKS* 12, 263-266 / *WA*, 150-153. For discussions of guilt- and sin-consciousness in Kierkegaard’s writings, see Amy Laura Hall, *Kierkegaard and the Treachery of Love*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, pp. 3f. and pp. 11-22; David J. Kangas, “The Very Opposite of Beginning With Nothing: Guilt Consciousness in Kierkegaard’s ‘The Gospel of Sufferings’ IV,” in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press 2005 (*The International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 15), pp. 287-313.



How ought we to respond upon discovering our own moral and religious shortcomings? Kierkegaard's advice could hardly depart more from what he says about handling the failings of others. "Hiding a multitude of sins" has no place here, and the strategies used to do so are prohibited. Forgiveness constitutes a striking example. We may and indeed must forgive others, but never ourselves:

It is not unjust for you to forgive another person for his sake if he asks for your forgiveness, or if you believe that he wishes it for God's sake, who requires it, or for your own sake, so you may not be disturbed.... Neither are you defrauding God of what belongs to him if you sell forgiveness for nothing; you are not wasting your time or misusing it if you ponder what may well serve as an excuse; and if no excuse is to be found you are not deceived if you...believe that the offense must be excusable. But when it is a matter of your own accounting, then you certainly would do wrong to forgive yourself the least little thing, because one's own righteousness is even worse than one's own blackest private guilt.<sup>37</sup>

[J]ust as the sensate man is distinguishable by his seeing the speck in his brother's eye but not seeing the log in his own, by rigorously condemning the same fault in others that he lightly forgives in himself, so the mark of a more profound and concerned person is that he judges himself most rigorously, uses all his ingenuity to excuse another person but is unable to excuse himself, indeed is convinced that the other one is more excusable.<sup>38</sup>

To summarize, Kierkegaard's accounts of self-love and neighbor-love are symmetrical when considered abstractly. The task in both cases is to promote the true good of the person in question. However, when Kierkegaard explains in concrete detail what it means to carry out these projects, we encounter asymmetry. He recommends treating others with leniency and charity, ourselves with stringency and

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<sup>37</sup> *SKS* 5, 393f. / *TD*, 12.

<sup>38</sup> *SKS* 5, 328 / *EUD*, 340. But cf. *SKS* 9, 373 / *WL*, 380. *SKS* 12, 30f. / *PC*, 20. *SKS* 12, 295 / *WA*, 181.

suspicion. The question I will pursue in what follows is whether such disparate treatment is consistent with loving our neighbor as ourselves.

### *III. Equal Regard, Not Identical Treatment*

The puzzle here resembles another. On the one hand, Christian interpretations of the love commandment often construe “the neighbor” as anyone whatsoever.<sup>39</sup> The term refers not just to those in physical proximity. Its extension includes acquaintances, strangers, friends, and enemies. In addition, the commandment is usually taken to imply not merely that we must love all those who fall into these categories but that we must love them in the same way, namely as we love ourselves. In short, we should have equal regard for everyone.<sup>40</sup>

On the other hand, most Christian traditions preserve a place for so-called “special relationships,” such as those obtaining between friends and family members. These bonds are celebrated rather than disparaged or abolished. Moreover, Christianity tends not to demand we treat those in our inner circles just as we do strangers and enemies. Different attitudes and responses are permitted here.

The tension between requiring equal love for everyone and making room for special relationships crops up in Kierkegaard’s writings.<sup>41</sup> On the one hand, he

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<sup>39</sup> O’Donovan, *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine*, p. 121; Gene Outka, “Universal Love and Impartiality,” in *The Love Commandments: Essays in Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy*, ed. by Edmund N. Santurri and William Werpehowski, Washington, D. C.: Georgetown University Press 1992, pp. 6-10. For an attack on this reading of the love commandment, see Oswald Hanfling, “Loving My Neighbour, Loving Myself,” *Philosophy*, vol. 68, no. 264, 1993, pp. 145-148.

<sup>40</sup> This interpretation is sometimes bolstered by appealing to the notion that all people possess equal value in virtue of their common humanity and thus deserve the same love. See *SKS* 9, 64-67 / *WL*, 58-60; Outka, *Agape*, pp. 9-24; Outka, “Universal Love and Impartiality,” pp. 6-12; Pope, “‘Equal Regard’ versus ‘Special Relations’?,” pp. 353-356.

<sup>41</sup> See Joseph Carlsmith, “Essentially Preferential: A Critique of Kierkegaard’s Works of Love,” *Gnosis*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2011, pp. 15-29; Ferreira, “Asymmetry and Self-Love”; Ferreira, *Love’s*

criticizes the introduction of preferentiality into our dealings with others; he claims we should draw no distinctions between people.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, he refuses to do away with the quintessentially preferential relationships of marriage and friendship. Indeed, he explicitly affirms them.<sup>43</sup>

Gene Outka develops what has become a canonical response to this problem. He distinguishes between equal regard for all people and identical treatment of them.<sup>44</sup> The love commandment, as he interprets it, requires only the former. Yes, we must view everyone as possessing the same intrinsic moral value. We must care about them for their own sake, not just for the sake of any benefits they may provide us. However, we do not have to act in precisely the same way toward each and every individual.

Outka marshals two compelling considerations in favor of his view. First, because we are finite creatures, we cannot treat everyone the same.<sup>45</sup> There are simply too many people in the world, and most of them reside outside our sphere of influence. Second, behaving the same toward everyone would be obtuse. Responding indiscriminately to the hungry, the naked, and the sick would be bizarrely insensitive. A prudent love responds variously according to the specific circumstances of those it encounters.<sup>46</sup>

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*Grateful Striving*, pp. 43-52; Ferreira, "The Problematic Agapeistic Ideal—Again"; Krishek, *Kierkegaard on Faith and Love*, chap. 4; John Lippitt, "Cracking the Mirror: On Kierkegaard's Concerns about Friendship," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 61, no. 3, 2007, pp. 131-150; Sylvia Walsh, "Forming the Heart: The Role of Love in Kierkegaard's Thought," in *The Grammar of the Heart: New Essays in Moral Philosophy and Theology*, ed. by Richard H. Bell, New York: Harper and Row 1988, pp. 234-256. For a more general discussion of the issue, see Outka, *Agape*, pp. 268-274.

<sup>42</sup> *SKS* 9, 27 / *WL*, 19. *SKS* 9, 51 / *WL*, 44. *SKS* 9, 61 / *WL*, 55. *SKS* 9, 64 / *WL*, 58. *SKS* 9, 69f. / *WL*, 63. See Krishek, *Kierkegaard on Faith and Love*, pp. 113-129.

<sup>43</sup> *SKS* 9, 69 / *WL*, 62. *SKS* 9, 145f. / *WL*, 143-145.

<sup>44</sup> *Agape*, p. 10, pp. 19-21, pp. 90f., and p. 269. For a precursor to Outka's distinction, see Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 26, a. 6.

<sup>45</sup> *Agape*, p. 269. See also Pope, "'Equal Regard' versus 'Special Relations'?" p. 368.

<sup>46</sup> *Agape*, pp. 19-21 and pp. 90f.

We can use Outka's insights to try to validate the asymmetry between self-love and neighbor-love Kierkegaard advocates.<sup>47</sup> But we have our work cut out for us. Outka's position does not legitimize any and every difference in treatment. The obligation to regard everyone equally remains in place and installs constraints: We cannot interact with people however we please. Disparities in attitude and behavior cannot be based on idiosyncratic preference or aversion. They must be grounded in morally salient differences between the cases.<sup>48</sup>

#### *IV. Differences between Others and Ourselves*

Several differences might justify being more latitudinarian with others than with ourselves. Two in particular seem promising. First, Kierkegaard often hints we know ourselves better than we know others.<sup>49</sup> We lack access to other people's minds. Their motivations and intentions remain forever obscure to us. By contrast, we can know our own minds. It is possible for us to become aware of what drives us to do what we do.

This difference matters because, like Kant, Kierkegaard locates moral and religious value in an action's originating motivations.<sup>50</sup> He considers a deed

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<sup>47</sup> Given that Outka and others find the distinction between identical treatment and equal regard in Kierkegaard's writings, this strategy seems fitting. Outka, *Agape*, p. 20. See also Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, pp. 198-202; Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, pp. 112f. For criticisms of this reading of Kierkegaard, see Carlsmith, "Essentially Preferential"; Krishek, *Kierkegaard on Faith and Love*, pp. 122-129.

<sup>48</sup> Outka, "Universal Love and Impartiality," p. 11; Pope, "'Equal Regard' versus 'Special Relations'?", p. 362.

<sup>49</sup> *SKS* 5, 68 / *EUD*, 58. *SKS* 5, 328 / *EUD*, 340. *SKS* 5, 410 / *TD*, 31. *SKS* 7, 132 / *CUPI*, 141f. *SKS* 7, 288-295 / *CUPI*, 316-324. *SKS* 9, 230f. / *WL*, 228f. *SKS* 10, 244 / *CD*, 237. Cf. Outka, *Agape*, pp. 305f.

<sup>50</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 7, 125-127 / *CUPI*, 134-136.

meritorious if and only if it is done out of love.<sup>51</sup> It follows that we are not in position to form reliable judgments about the moral and religious standing of others. The only evidence at our disposal is observations and reports of what people say and do. But these data underdetermine the issue. Kierkegaard believes *any* action can be performed and *any* statement can be uttered out of love or its opposite. He explicitly says that “there is nothing, no ‘thus and so,’ that can unconditionally be said to demonstrate unconditionally the presence of love or to demonstrate unconditionally its absence.”<sup>52</sup> Johannes Climacus draws the conclusion for us: “Scripture teaches: ‘Judge not, that you be not judged.’ This is said as an admonition and warning, but it is also an impossibility. One person cannot ethically judge another.”<sup>53</sup>

Judging *ourselves* is another kettle of fish. We can know what led us to say and do what we have said and done.<sup>54</sup> Of course, introspection sometimes goes awry and the danger of self-deception is never far off. Still, in principle, we have access to our own motivations. So moral and religious assessment of our own words and deeds is potentially felicitous in a way it is not when it comes to others.<sup>55</sup>

Second, Kierkegaard thinks we have different duties and responsibilities toward ourselves than toward others.<sup>56</sup> Most notably, each person is responsible only for his or her own ethical and religious development. As we read in *Purity of Heart*, “How you act and the responsibility for it is finally wholly and solely yours as an individual.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> SKS 9, 12 / WL, 4. See also SKS 5, 65 / EUD, 55.

<sup>52</sup> SKS 9, 22 / WL, 14. See also SKS 9, 215f. / WL, 212f. SKS 9, 230-232 / WL, 228-230.

<sup>53</sup> SKS 7, 294 / CUP1, 322. Cf. Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, pp. 72-76.

<sup>54</sup> SKS 7, 132 / CUP1, 141f. SKS 7, 288-295 / CUP1, 316-324.

<sup>55</sup> See SKS 5, 68 / EUD, 58. SKS 5, 328 / EUD, 340.

<sup>56</sup> For similar claims, see Adams, “Self-Love and the Vices of Self-Preference,” pp. 510f.; O’Donovan, *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine*, pp. 116f.; Outka, *Agape*, p. 305; Outka, “Universal Love and Impartiality,” pp. 60-72.

<sup>57</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing: Spiritual Preparation for the Office of Confession*, trans. by Douglas V. Steere, New York: Harper and Row 1956, p. 189; SKS 8, 230 / UD, 131.

The reasoning here is straightforward. It is a structural feature of agency that some things we can only do for ourselves.<sup>58</sup> Only I can perform my own actions or think my own thoughts. More significantly, only I can adopt the moral good or communion with God as my ultimate end.<sup>59</sup> Since no one can do these things on my behalf, no one besides me can be responsible for them. Following Kant, Kierkegaard maintains we can be responsible only for that over which we have control.<sup>60</sup>

Of course, Kierkegaard believes we can help others do things for themselves. We can even aid them with important tasks such as loving their neighbors or cleaving to God. Indeed, we should.<sup>61</sup> But any duties here are qualified by a further obligation to respect others' autonomy. People have the right to make decisions free from any push we might wish to give them toward one option rather than another.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, we are morally required to keep our distance from those we assist. We must allow them to go their own way or, in Kierkegaard's words, "to stand alone."<sup>63</sup>

Given all these considerations, it seems fitting to focus more attention on our own moral and religious development. Even the rhetorical flourish Kierkegaard adds at this point does not appear unreasonable:

In order that all the power and the attention of mind...can be concentrated in the service of earnestness, it is of service to you...that you come to feel the full weight of the truth that it is you who alone are assigned to yourself, have nothing, nothing at all, to do with others, but have all the more, or rather, everything to do with yourself.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Outka, "Universal Love and Impartiality," p. 61.

<sup>59</sup> Outka, "Universal Love and Impartiality," pp. 61f. and pp. 64f.

<sup>60</sup> *SKS* 7, 127 / *CUP1*, 136. *SKS* 22, 78, NB11:131 / *JP* 1, 975.

<sup>61</sup> *SKS* 9, 272-277 / *WL*, 274-279.

<sup>62</sup> See *SKS* 7, 54 / *CUP1*, 49. *SVI* XIII, 538 / *PV*, 50.

<sup>63</sup> *SKS* 7, 250f. / *CUP1*, 277. See also *SKS* 6, 318-321 / *SLW*, 342-345. *SKS* 7, 236 / *CUP1*, 260. *SKS* 7, 240 / *CUP1*, 264. *SKS* 9, 272-277 / *WL*, 274-279. *SKS* 27, 396, *Papir* 366:5 / *JP* 1, 650.15.

<sup>64</sup> *SKS* 10, 244f. / *CD*, 238. See also *SKS* 5, 392 / *TD*, 9f. *SKS* 7, 71 / *CUP1*, 69. *SKS* 7, 122 / *CUP1*, 130. *SKS* 7, 137n / *CUP1*, 147n. *SKS* 7, 294-296 / *CUP1*, 322-324. *SKS* 8, 227f. / *UD*, 127f. *SKS* 9,

### *V. Destabilizing the Differences*

We thus have a *prima facie* case for treating ourselves and others differently.

However, it fails to withstand closer scrutiny.

Take the first point, that we know ourselves better than we know others. It is true we lack certainty about the contents of other minds. But should we really be more confident about the contents of our own? Although Kierkegaard fails to give a consistent answer to this question, he quite often says “no.”<sup>65</sup> In *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, he asserts that our intentions are always somewhat hazy to us.<sup>66</sup> He repeats the claim in *Christian Discourses*: “Alas, who does know himself! Is it not exactly this to which the earnest and honest self-examination finally leads as its last and truest, this humble confession: ‘Who knows his errors? From my hidden faults cleanse thou me’ (Psalm 19:12).”<sup>67</sup>

More generally, Kierkegaard’s persistent worries about self-deception make sense only if he thinks self-transparency is a problem.<sup>68</sup> And his exhortations to test ourselves, to put ourselves in situations where our responses reveal whether our dealings with others are unselfish and our devotion to God is pure, presuppose we cannot simply look inside ourselves and directly observe the truth.<sup>69</sup> To summarize,

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22f. / *WL*, 14f. *SKS* 9, 355 / *WL*, 361. *SKS* 9, 376 / *WL*, 383f. *SKS* 10, 218-221 / *CD*, 209-212. For a discussion of this point, see Ferreira, “Asymmetry and Self-Love,” pp. 54f.

<sup>65</sup> For passages that suggest self-transparency is possible, see *SKS* 1, 331 / *CI*, 298. *SKS* 9, 355 / *WL*, 361. *SKS* 11, 130 / *SUD*, 14. *SKS* 11, 164 / *SUD*, 49. *SKS* 11, 235 / *SUD*, 124.

<sup>66</sup> *SKS* 5, 412f. / *TD*, 33f.

<sup>67</sup> *SKS* 10, 308 / *CD*, 287. See also *SKS* 3, 158 / *EO2*, 160. *SKS* 10, 324 / *CD*, 300. *SKS* 11, 162f. / *SUD*, 48. *SKS* 11, 213 / *SUD*, 101.

Cf. Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, pp. 72-76.

<sup>68</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 10, 181-183 / *CD*, 170f. *SKS* 14, 175 / *TM*, 45. *SVI* XII, 415f. / *JFY*, 139f. *SVI* XIII, 529-533 / *PV*, 41-44.

<sup>69</sup> E.g., *SKS* 9, 339-352 / *WL*, 345-358.

for Kierkegaard, our ability to know ourselves does not obviously outstrip our ability to know others. Thus he cannot appeal to such epistemic considerations to justify contrasting treatment of self and other.

Turn now to the second point, namely that we have different duties and responsibilities toward others than toward ourselves. Less comes of it than meets the eye. To begin, having greater *responsibility* for ourselves does not warrant having greater *concern* for ourselves. The reason is that, on a Kierkegaardian framework, the distinction between concern for self and concern for others dissolves. Proper self-concern involves cultivating love for God within ourselves.<sup>70</sup> But we express this love for God by serving other people.<sup>71</sup> And we serve other people in part by helping them cultivate loving dispositions.<sup>72</sup> Thus, rather than leading us to disregard others' moral and religious development, caring for our own development revolves around it. Working for our own good *just is* working for the good of others.<sup>73</sup> In Kierkegaard's words, "To love yourself in the right way and to love the neighbor correspond perfectly to one another; *fundamentally they are one and the same thing.*"<sup>74</sup>

Our duty to respect others' autonomy is no trump card here. True, some people prefer to be left alone. They desire no outside guidance when it comes to how they live their lives. But others want help living up to their ethical and religious commitments.<sup>75</sup> They would like someone to point out where they fall short and even to push them in the right direction from time to time. Letting such people "go their own way" is consistent with scrutinizing their lives and attending to their moral and religious development.

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<sup>70</sup> SKS 9, 111 / WL, 107.

<sup>71</sup> SKS 9, 161 / WL, 160f.

<sup>72</sup> SKS 9, 111 / WL, 107.

<sup>73</sup> SKS 10, 127f. / CD 116f.

<sup>74</sup> SKS 9, 30 / WL, 22, my emphasis. See also Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, pp. 246f.

<sup>75</sup> For discussion of this point, see Outka, *Agape*, pp. 306-309. See also Mt 18:15-18; 1 Co 5:12-13.



Finally, even if we should concentrate more on ourselves than on others, the real issue lies elsewhere. There is nothing terribly unsettling about Kierkegaard's advice that we focus *more* on building up love in ourselves than in others. What is vexing is his suggestion that we do so *in diametrically opposed ways*, by being lenient with others and stringent with ourselves. The particular differences in duties and responsibilities we have canvassed do not extend so far as to justify *this* position.

### *VI. The Aristotelian Solution*

There is another morally salient difference between the two cases, obvious but as yet unmentioned. We are generally biased in our own favor. We tend to love ourselves too much, our neighbors too little. We are overly indulgent and forgiving when assessing ourselves, excessively strict and hard-hearted when evaluating others.<sup>76</sup>

Does this difference in disposition license the asymmetrical treatment of self and other Kierkegaard defends? Does it justify handling ourselves more stringently than others and with greater suspicion? No. Relating to ourselves more harshly than we relate to others simply represents the opposite extreme. And the opposite extreme is equally vicious. Self-abnegation carries as many problems as selfishness and self-centeredness.<sup>77</sup>

Nevertheless, our propensity to over-love ourselves and under-love others may warrant something similar, to wit the use of a strategy Aristotle defends in Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle says that when we drift toward one vicious extreme

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<sup>76</sup> See Ferreira, "Asymmetry and Self-Love," p. 231; Outka, "Universal Love and Impartiality," pp. 44-46; Gene Outka, "Theocentric Agape and the Self: An Asymmetrical Affirmation in Response to Colin Grant's Either/Or," *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1996, p. 40.

<sup>77</sup> Lippitt, "True Self-Love and True Self-Sacrifice," pp. 129-134; Weaver, *Self Love and Christian Ethics*, pp. 61-66.

we must drag ourselves in the contrary direction. We will thereby reach the ideal intermediate condition.<sup>78</sup> Applying the idea to the matter at hand, those possessed of a bias in their own favor do well to offset it by striving to love others more than themselves.<sup>79</sup>

Two comments about Aristotle's advice are in order. First, although he recommends *aiming* toward one excess and away from another, this is only the proximate end. The final or ultimate end is a mean between the two extremes. Thus those adhering to the Aristotelian strategy will not *actually* love themselves less than others. They will work toward this state with the hope of coming to treat their neighbors and themselves neither too stringently nor too leniently and ultimately in more or less the same way.

Second, the specific strategy of trying to love others more than oneself is not for everyone. Those not disposed to love themselves too much and others too little should eschew it. It would carry them to undesirable excesses of the opposite sort. Moreover, those who do stray in the direction of leniency toward self and severity toward others should not necessarily follow it either. It will not always comprise the most effective way to overcome their vices.

### *VII. A More Moderate Kierkegaard*

I believe much of Kierkegaard's rhetoric concerning self-love and neighbor-love is an attempt to enact the foregoing Aristotelian strategy. He is trying to bring his readers to

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<sup>78</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1109b1-1109b7.

<sup>79</sup> For other accounts of this strategy, see Outka, "Universal Love and Impartiality," pp. 46-48; Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons 1932, p. 271.

a moderate position in this arena by advocating the extreme contrary to their natural inclinations. His recommendation that we be more rigorous with ourselves than with others is not a statement of a moral ideal. It is a gambit or stratagem designed to rehabilitate us from our tendency to be partial toward ourselves.

Why interpret Kierkegaard this way? First, it enables us to reconcile his commitments regarding self-love and neighbor-love. On the one hand, he can maintain the two loves should be symmetrical, similar in kind as well as degree. This represents the ultimate end for Kierkegaard. On the other hand, he can hold that the manners in which we go about loving our neighbors and loving ourselves should diverge. We should strive to be lenient, charitable, and forgiving toward them; the opposite toward ourselves. This position picks out the proximate end, the direction we must head given our starting point if we wish to reach the ultimate end.

Second, Kierkegaard sometimes frames his authorship as a “corrective.”<sup>80</sup> He claims it supplies a counterweight to the spirit of his age. It offers something just as one-sided, but with the opposite emphasis. Accordingly, he warns us not to confuse the recommendations in his texts with ordinary normative claims.<sup>81</sup> His remarks supply an account of how to proceed *given our present circumstances*. They do not describe what to do *all else being equal*.

The overt target of Kierkegaard’s corrective is Danish Lutheranism.<sup>82</sup> He believes this movement has lost its way. Overcompensating for the error Luther originally addressed, it has placed too much stock in divine grace and not enough in striving to fulfill the law. Kierkegaard seeks to push the church back toward an

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<sup>80</sup> SKS 13, 25 / PV, 18. SKS 22, 194f., NB12:97 / JP 6, 6467. SKS 24, 74, NB21:122 / JP 6, 6693. SKS 24, 212, NB23:15 / JP 1, 708.

<sup>81</sup> SKS 22, 194f., NB12:97 / JP 6, 6467. SKS 25, 51f., NB26:47 / JP 1, 709. SKS 25, 228, NB28:17 / JP 1, 710. SKS 25, 279, NB28:82 / JP 1, 711.

<sup>82</sup> Ferreira, *Love’s Grateful Striving*, pp. 11f. and pp. 19-21; Hall, *Kierkegaard and the Treachery of Love*, pp. 11-22.

intermediate position by reintroducing a healthy appreciation for the demands of righteousness.<sup>83</sup>

Although Kierkegaard only explicitly talks about providing a corrective in this specific context, Jamie Ferreira advocates interpreting other areas of his thought in light of the strategy.<sup>84</sup> I am sympathetic to Ferreira's approach, but think we must pursue it with caution. The temptation is to downplay any recommendation we find displeasing on the grounds that it is just another corrective. Thus, for every statement we wish to treat this way, we need reasons for doing so other than its disconcerting nature. We need evidence indicating it represents only one side of the issue for Kierkegaard.

At this juncture, a third consideration in support of my position becomes important. Kierkegaard sometimes intimates that, for both self-love and neighbor-love, the ideal *is* an intermediate position between leniency and stringency. It is not one or the other depending on the object of our attention. For example, near the beginning of *Works of Love*, he admits we can take self-stringency too far:

Whoever has any knowledge of people will certainly admit that just as he has often wished to be able to move them to relinquish self-love, he has also had to wish that it were possible to teach them to love themselves.... When the depressed person desires to be rid of life, indeed, of himself, is this not because he is unwilling to learn earnestly and rigorously to love

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<sup>83</sup> To support this interpretation, both Jamie Ferreira and Amy Laura Hall lean on the following journal entry: "What Luther says is excellent, the one thing needful and the sole explanation—that this whole doctrine (of the Atonement and in the main all Christianity) must be traced back to the struggle of the anguished conscience. Remove the anguished conscience, and you may as well close the churches and convert them into dance halls" (*SKS* 20, 69, NB:79 / *KJN* 4, 67f.). See Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, p. 19; Hall, *Kierkegaard and the Treachery of Love*, p. 16. For discussions of Kierkegaard's relationship to Lutheranism, see Craig Hinkson, "Will the Real Martin Luther Please Stand Up! Kierkegaard's View of Luther versus the Evolving Perceptions of the Tradition," in *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself!*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press 2002 (*The International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 21), pp. 37-76; Simon D. Podmore, "The Lightning and the Earthquake: Kierkegaard on the *Anfechtung* of Luther," *The Heythrop Journal*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2006, pp. 562-578.

<sup>84</sup> Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, p. 11 and p. 20.

himself...? When someone self-tormentingly thinks to do God a service by torturing himself, what is his sin except not willing to love himself in the right way?<sup>85</sup>

The implication of this passage is that we ought to limit how severe we are with ourselves. We must not become so thoroughly ruthless with ourselves that we despair of self-worth altogether. A degree of forbearance is necessary.

Similarly, toward the end of *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard confesses it is possible to be too easy on others. We can take mitigating explanations too far and hide sins when we should not. Indeed, making people aware of their faults is sometimes appropriate:

It would be a weakness, not love, to make the unloving one believe that he was right in the evil he did; it would not be the conciliatory spirit but a treachery that would strengthen him in the evil. No, it is of importance, it is part of love's work, that with the help of the loving one it becomes entirely clear to the unloving one how irresponsibly he has acted so that he deeply feels his wrong.<sup>86</sup>

Thus the rigorousness with which Kierkegaard so often encourages us to treat ourselves is sometimes to be directed toward others. Our interpersonal relations should not always be marked by those three pleasant words: leniency, charity, forgiveness.

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<sup>85</sup> SKS 9, 30f. / WL, 23. The adverbs “earnestly [*alvorligt*]” and “rigorously [*strengt*]” modify “learn” and not “love.” Kierkegaard is not claiming suicidal people just need to become more stringent with themselves. The Danish reads: “*Naar den Tungsindige ønsker at blive af med Livet, ja med sig selv, er dette da ikke, fordi han ikke vil lære strengt og alvorligt at elske sig selv?*” (SKS 9, 31) For a discussion of the general idea behind this passage, see Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, pp. 181f.; Ferreira, “Asymmetry and Self-Love,” pp. 52f.; Ferreira, “Rethinking Hatred of Self: A Kierkegaardian Exploration,” pp. 129-136; Lippitt, “True Self-Love and True Self-Sacrifice,” pp. 129-134; Ronald F. Marshall, “News from the Graveyard: Kierkegaard's Analysis of Christian Self-Hatred,” *Pro Ecclesia*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2000, pp. 29-31; Outka, *Agape*, pp. 70f.; Weaver, *Self Love and Christian Ethics*, pp. 61-66.

<sup>86</sup> SKS 9, 333 / WL, 338.

### VIII. Are Kierkegaard's Ethics Necessarily Radical?

The proposal of a more moderate Kierkegaard will not sit well with some readers. It conflicts with the common thought that Kierkegaard's ethics are necessarily radical, and for reasons having to do with his Christianity. He *must* insist on the strenuousness of the moral requirement because he has to get us to recognize how far short of the ideal we fall. Only once we acknowledge our depravity will we repent and turn to God in a wholehearted fashion. Only once we are shipwrecked on sin will we rest in God's forgiveness and grace. Thus, any attempts to "soften the blow" must be rejected. Such interpretations, as Amy Laura Hall says, "miss and undermine the meaning of Kierkegaard's texts."<sup>87</sup>

There is good textual evidence for this position.<sup>88</sup> But we must balance it against other considerations. First, as noted in the previous section, there are indications that Kierkegaard considers it possible to be too hard on ourselves. Despairing over our self-worth is religiously problematic.

Second, the line of thought outlined above justifies harsh treatment not just of ourselves but our neighbors as well. They too must turn to God, and we have an obligation to assist them. Among the things we can do is to push them toward sin consciousness. Like good maieutic teachers, we can help them see for themselves the

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<sup>87</sup> *Kierkegaard and the Treachery of Love*, pp. 12f. For a similar claim, see Ronald F. Marshall, "News from the Graveyard: Kierkegaard's Analysis of Christian Self-Hatred," *Pro Ecclesia* 9, no. 1, 2000, pp. 19-42.

<sup>88</sup> See most notably *SKS* 4, 317-331 / *CI*, 9-24. For an extended defense of this reading, see Hall, *Kierkegaard and the Treachery of Love*. For criticism, see Michelle Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010, pp. 160-169.

ugly truth about themselves.<sup>89</sup> There might be many ways to proceed here. But one promising strategy is to criticize them vociferously. Indeed, if the slightest leniency with ourselves inhibits us from properly acknowledging our moral turpitude, anything but harshness with others would seem unacceptable for the same reason.

The problem is that harshness is the opposite of what Kierkegaard recommends. He urges us to be conciliatory and understanding when dealing with others. We are to cover over their transgressions whenever we can and forgive them whenever we cannot.

Therefore, those who read Kierkegaard as claiming that we must be uncompromisingly strict with ourselves face a difficult choice. They must explain away either (a) passages in which he endorses leniency with others or (b) passages in which he embraces symmetry between self-love and neighbor-love. For reasons I have already discussed, I find both alternatives unacceptable. Thus, I believe we ought to back off the initial idea that Kierkegaard advocates unqualified self-stringency. That does not mean I think he wants us to be easy on ourselves. Some rigor is doubtless necessary to prompt us to rely on God. I am merely claiming that he sees this rigor as having limits.

### *IX. On "Corrective" Readings of Kierkegaard*

I conclude with another potential concern about my interpretation of Kierkegaard. Like all readings that make capital of the corrective aspect of his work, it has the property of being unfalsifiable. It is hospitable to virtually any piece of textual

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<sup>89</sup> SKS 10, 205 / CD, 196.

evidence. For instance, someone might continue to press the objection raised in the previous section by noting that Kierkegaard explicitly and repeatedly says Christian ethics is radical, demanding, and offensive.<sup>90</sup> The worry is that I could dismiss such a charge all too easily by saying these passages *also* form part of the corrective. They are just another component of Kierkegaard's strategy to ameliorate our tendency toward self-indulgence.

Such a maneuver would no doubt be frustrating. To the degree I must rely on it, my view limps. Now I can avoid doing so here, since driving toward the opposite extreme of a natural tendency will always be strenuous and advocating such a tactic will often be offensive, at least to those firmly ensconced in their ways. But the problem has been raised and it is worth exploring precisely how much damage unfalsifiability does.

Several points deserve mention. First, the banal: Unfalsifiable readings are not therefore false. They also are not completely indifferent to textual evidence. A passage counts against them if accommodating it requires introducing bizarre or *ad hoc* addendums. For example, if we discovered journal entries in which Kierkegaard said his proclamations about self-love had to be taken at face value, my view would suffer. It would be difficult to account for such possible entries without stretching my reading to the point of incredulity.

Finally, unfalsifiability is but one of many evaluative properties to place in the hopper when assessing an interpretation, and its presence is not always decisive. For instance, my account has the benefit of enabling us to see Kierkegaard's position as internally consistent. I need not say he holds contradictory views about self-love and neighbor-love. Moreover, I do not have to sacrifice his central commitments

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<sup>90</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 9, 191-201 / *WL*, 191-202. *SVI* XII, 374-419 / *JFY*, 91-143.



regarding these two loves. He can still maintain that they should be symmetrical, as the biblical injunction implies, and that we should strive to love others more than ourselves. Moreover, the position I defend is not devoid of textual support. Several passages are best understood as suggesting Kierkegaard pursues the Aristotelian strategy I attribute to him. In the end, these virtues outweigh the vice of unfalsifiability. They render defensible my way of handling the relationship between self-love and neighbor-love in Kierkegaard's ethics.