

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction
How should I love myself?

Whoever has any knowledge of people will certainly admit that just as he has had to wish that it were possible to teach them to relinquish self-love, he has also had to wish that it were possible to teach them to love themselves.

(WL 23/SKS 9 30)

Do you love yourself? If that question strikes you as strange or even obnoxious, perhaps that's because you think of the very idea of 'self-love' as narcissistic. On this view, love should be directed at others. Focusing it on oneself is just vain and self-absorbed. Not for you the advice of the kind of self-help guru who would have you repeat 'I am gorgeous, sexy and vibrant and anyone who spends time with me is blessed' in front of the mirror every day. Down that road lies the absurdity of the Dutch artist Jennifer Hoes, who married herself in a public ceremony, telling a Haarlem newspaper: 'I want to celebrate with others how much I'm in love with myself.'¹

But if the question seems innocuous, perhaps that's because you share a commonly held view: that you have to love yourself before you can love others. Only someone sufficiently at ease with themselves is capable of loving other people. For reasons we shall investigate in due course, Harry Frankfurt claims that true self-love is 'the deepest and most essential ... achievement of a serious and successful life'.² Or perhaps you're somewhere in the middle: slightly nervous about the connotations of a term like 'self-love' but viewing it as a necessary evil. As Voltaire quipped, self-love (*amour-propre*) 'resembles the instrument that perpetuates the species: it is necessary, it is dear to us, it gives us pleasure, and it must be hidden.'³ The problem of whether we should love ourselves – and if so how – has a particular resonance within Christian thought. After all,

¹ Cited in Furedi 2004: 146. ² Frankfurt 2004: 68. ³ Voltaire 1972: 35.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03561-4 - Kierkegaard and the Problem of Self-Love

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Christian love is often thought of as selfless. And yet the second love commandment in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament tells us that we should love our neighbours as we love ourselves.⁴ So how *do* we love ourselves? How *should* we? Philosophers within this tradition – including St Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Søren Kierkegaard – have aimed to tease apart good and bad, proper and improper, forms of self-love. But less theologically minded philosophers – including Aristotle, Hobbes, Hume, Spinoza and Nietzsche – have wrestled with essentially the same issue of how properly to love oneself. Further, some have argued that distinguishing such forms of self-love is also crucial for contemporary psychotherapy, as therapists and their clients wrestle with the need to avoid such extremes as narcissistic personality disorder on the one hand and chronically low self-esteem on the other.

Self-love, ‘the object of a thousand passing allusions’, as Oliver O’Donovan puts it, is a notorious problem in Christian thought, and the tradition is littered with *prima facie* incompatible claims about it.⁵ For instance, O’Donovan notes that in the thought of Augustine alone we find such claims as that self-love is ‘the primal destruction of man’, and yet that ‘you did not love yourself when you did not love the God who made you’.⁶ John Calvin describes self-love as a ‘noxious pest’, while Karl Barth wryly opines that ‘God will never think of blowing on this fire, which is bright enough already.’⁷ Anders Nygren famously claims that ‘Christianity does not recognise self-love as a legitimate form of love. Christian love moves in two directions, towards God and towards its neighbour; and in self-love it finds its chief adversary which must be fought and conquered.’⁸ Yet Bishop Joseph Butler expresses the view that men do not have *enough* regard to their own good, and Kierkegaard, like Augustine, insists – as our opening quote suggests – on the importance of learning to love oneself in the right way.⁹

In his notable survey of views of the relation between *agape* and self-love, Gene Outka shows something of the extraordinary range of views of self-love that have been held by Christian thinkers. Self-love has variously been regarded as: ‘wholly nefarious’; normal, reasonable and prudent (and so requiring neither praise nor blame); justified derivatively on the basis of regard for others; and a definite – not merely derivative – obligation to oneself.¹⁰ In this book, I argue that the work of Kierkegaard, especially his

⁴ See Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:25–37.

⁵ O’Donovan 2006: 2. ⁶ O’Donovan 2006: 1.

⁷ Calvin 2008: 451; Barth 1963: 388. ⁸ Nygren 1969: 217. ⁹ Butler 1983: 21.

¹⁰ Outka 1972: 55–74; for the cited phrase, see 56.

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monumental 1847 text *Works of Love* (*Kjerlighedens Gjerninger*) is highly pertinent to this issue. In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard poses a stark and troubling challenge. He argues that the relationships we typically treasure most (romantic love and friendship) are, all too often, merely disguised forms of ‘selfish’ self-love. Yet, I shall argue, Kierkegaard also gives us valuable resources for responding to this challenge of how we can love ourselves, as well as others, well. We shall see this by applying to the self key aspects of the picture of love that emerge from the second part, especially, of *Works of Love*. These features, I shall suggest, have tended to be largely overlooked in the secondary literature explicitly on Kierkegaard and self-love.

Perhaps the central puzzle is this. We have important intuitions that lead us to *value* the self, such that we tend to think poorly of those who seem to lack all self-respect. (As Kant memorably remarked, ‘one who makes himself a worm cannot complain afterwards if people step on him’.¹¹) The idea of ‘becoming a self’ is famously central to Kierkegaard’s thought.¹² And one of the pseudonyms who explores it in most detail, Johannes Climacus, is amongst the Kierkegaardian voices for whom there seems to be something fundamental about self-love:

Self-love is the ground or goes to the ground in all love, which is why any religion of love [*Kjerlighed*] we might conceive would presuppose, just as epigrammatically as truly, one condition only and assume it as given: to love oneself in order to command loving the neighbour as oneself. (*PF* 39/*SKS* 4 244)

Yet we also have intuitions, equally as important, that lead us to see great value in various kinds of self-giving, self-sacrifice and self-emptying, even on occasion to the point of death. Can we hold these intuitions together? If so, how?

The central text for our exploration will be *Works of Love*. The vital importance of this text for Kierkegaard’s ethics is now widely agreed upon amongst Kierkegaard scholars. For instance, in her excellent commentary on the text, M. Jamie Ferreira claims:

Although in the pseudonymous writings one may discern important anticipations of the ethic found in *Works of Love*, I suggest that they can only be appreciated properly when seen in relation to this work. Without

¹¹ Kant 1996c: 559 (6: 437). In quoting from Kant, I provide the page number of the edition cited, followed by the Akademie pagination.

¹² This central theme dominates such major texts as *Either/Or*, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and *The Sickness Unto Death*.

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978-1-107-03561-4 - Kierkegaard and the Problem of Self-Love

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moving forward to *Works of Love*, scholarship can only unfairly evaluate Kierkegaard's various contributions to ethics; yet some of the most popular accounts of Kierkegaard's place in the history of ethics have been done solely from the limited perspective of the pseudonymous works.¹³

Works of Love has been the focus of considerable interest in recent years, and the present work seeks to add to those studies that find the questions it raises to be of philosophical as well as theological interest. But before outlining my book's line of argument, we should consider two possible objections to the procedure I shall be undertaking.

I Two caveats: self-love, the self and its virtues

The first might be described as the 'ethical evasion' charge. Should we be asking a question like 'What is it to love oneself properly?' at all? Kierkegaard expresses the following worry about ethical and religious filibustering:

How many an individual has not asked, 'What is truth?' and at bottom hoped that it would be a long time before truth would come so close to him that in the same instant it would determine what it was his duty to do at that moment. When the Pharisee, 'in order to justify himself' asked, 'Who is my neighbor?' he presumably thought that this might develop into a very protracted inquiry, so that it would perhaps take a long time and then perhaps end with the admission that it was impossible to define the concept 'neighbor' with absolute accuracy – for this very reason he asked the question, to find an escape, to waste time, and to justify himself. (WL 96–7/SKS 9 101)

But I think a generalised version of this line is excessively harsh. In a discussion of the Pharisee's question, Patrick Sheil suggests that, regardless of the motives of this particular individual, 'there is nothing in the actual words spoken by the Pharisee that reveals his question to be a bad-faith style of question.'¹⁴ Sheil illustrates this claim by an example of a person trying to decide which of two or three neighbours he should help first:

How about the neighbour that appears to be most neighbourly towards others? It seems reasonable, but wait a minute; what if the neighbour that is not so neighbourly towards others *is more likely to become so* if and when he

¹³ Ferreira 2001: 5. Ferreira notes in particular MacIntyre's account of Kierkegaard in his *A Short History of Ethics*. A similar view on the centrality of *Works of Love* is expressed by Evans 2004: 44. Sharon Krishek (2009) takes a rather different view, which we shall discuss in Chapter 4.

¹⁴ Sheil 2011: 81.

Cambridge University Press

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or she has received our assistance?¹⁵ The first neighbour, our initial favourite, may not need the demonstration of neighbourly help as much as this other one.¹⁶

Such considerations suggest that not every reflection on what my duty implies in a particular case (or every request for more information) can be dismissed with the haste Kierkegaard sometimes betrays in the face of such questions. Moreover, there is something ironic about this haste, given the importance for Kierkegaard of the virtue of patience, which we shall discuss briefly (after all, who has the time?) in Chapter 7. Moreover, Kierkegaard's response in such cases is hardly the most loving. The suggestion that opening up 'an interval, a spare moment' for such questions involves making 'a concession ... to curiosity and idleness and selfishness' (WL 97/SKS 9 102), while it might be flagging a significant warning, seems too cynical. Patrick Stokes makes a similar observation in relation to some related 'troubling claims' of Kierkegaard's:

In *Christian Discourses* he insists that there should never be a question about what my duty *is* but simply about whether I have done my duty [CD 205/SKS 10 214], and that asking such questions about the content of duty is therefore simply an evasion of the demand to *do* my duty. In *For Self-Examination* we are told that it is an evasion to continue to try to understand the content of Scripture completely, rather than seeking to carry out those of its demands one *has* understood, however imperfectly [FSE 32/SKS 13 59–60]. Yet 'what is my duty here?' and 'what precisely does Scripture require of those who believe in its moral authority?' seem to be perfectly philosophically (and theologically and philologically) respectable questions – even ones that might be essential to practical reason. Kierkegaard seems to betray both an over-confidence in the clarity of scripture and a stunning blindness to the possibilities of genuine moral disagreement.¹⁷

The questions 'How should I love myself?' and 'What does loving oneself properly involve?' are central to this book. Kierkegaard describes Christian love as 'sheer action' (WL 98/SKS 9 103), but the contrasts he draws with this – resting satisfied 'in the delusion of being finished'; dwelling 'indulgently on itself'; sitting 'idle marvelling at itself' (WL 98–9/SKS 9 103) – would hardly be fair descriptions of the pursuit of such questions.

¹⁵ Kierkegaard's discussion in 'Love Builds Up' (WL 209–24/SKS 9 212–26) – where he argues that the loving person presupposes love in the person he loves – suggests so. See the discussion of this in Chapter 7.

¹⁶ Sheil 2011: 81.

¹⁷ Stokes 2013: 378–9. See also Stokes 2010a: 117–18.

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My response to a Kierkegaard who suggested that they be ruled offside for the same reason as the Pharisee's would thus be along precisely the lines Stokes urges here.¹⁸ (For this reason, we should not uncritically accept Kierkegaard's image of love as an arrow that would fall to the ground if it wanted to 'dwell upon itself' [*WL* 182/*SKS* 9 182] as meaning that we can never reflect upon our love at all.)

There is, however, one respect in which I shall be heeding Kierkegaard's advice on this point. An approach to these questions that supposed that it could not say anything about self-love until it had first worked out a watertight theory of the self, of personal identity, would, I think, indeed be prone to Kierkegaard's charge. I shall be assuming that we *do* have a sense of what the self is, at least to an extent sufficient to be able to make sense of the question of how we may properly love ourselves. It may well be that some of the interesting work currently being done on Kierkegaard's view of the self (such as the extent to which he is, or is not, an advocate of a 'narrative' view of selfhood) might be placed in productive dialogue with parts of the present work.¹⁹ But that dialogue itself lies beyond the scope of this book. Suffice it to say, for present purposes, that for Kierkegaard selfhood is first and foremost a *task*, and that 'proper self-love' must be understood against this background. It is perfectly possible to consider the normative question of how one can and should love oneself properly without feeling obliged to tackle metaphysical questions as to the exact nature of 'the self'.

A second issue concerns a claim I shall be making, that proper self-love is a kind of self-relation that involves the cultivation of certain qualities and capacities that it makes sense to describe as virtues. I share the view, argued for by Robert C. Roberts, that Kierkegaard belongs to the mainstream tradition of 'virtuism' and that he aims to build up such virtues as hope, trust, the capacity for forgiveness and patience.²⁰ But some Kierkegaard scholars have been very wary of the term 'virtue', given the widespread distaste for the term in some Protestant thought.²¹ Claudia

¹⁸ In her response to my paper at 'Why Kierkegaard Still Matters', the Sixth International Kierkegaard Conference at St Olaf College in July 2010, Vanessa Rumble encouraged me to tackle this charge head on. I am grateful to Vanessa for her thoughtful comments, questions and provocations on that occasion.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Davenport and Rudd 2001; Lippitt 2007; Rudd 2007; Stokes 2010b; Davenport 2012; and Rudd 2012.

²⁰ Roberts 2003. This is not to say that Kierkegaard is committed to 'virtue ethics' in any sense that would oppose that approach to, say, deontological approaches to ethics. It seems clear that there are deontological, teleological and virtues-based elements at work in Kierkegaard's thought.

²¹ See, for instance, Kirmmse 2001.

Cambridge University Press

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Welz offers a justification of its use that is impressively succinct.²² As Welz notes, there are several ‘arguments (or clichés)’ typically offered against such use.²³ These include the worry that ‘virtue implies an element of selfishness’; that the concern with acquiring virtues amounts to a claim to meritoriousness; and that virtue acquisition implies an autonomy that contradicts the Christian claim that man is utterly dependent upon God.²⁴ But, as she rightly adds, ‘one could imagine a theory of virtue as a theory of the constitution of the author of an action, *including* certain statements on its qualificability by habit and also on self-perfection, but *excluding* any statements about meritorious action’.²⁵

The key point is the last one: that one does not need to consider one’s virtues as achievements of one’s own but can rather view them as gifts, the appropriate attitude to which is gratitude. But even this might smack of complacency (‘How blessed I am to be such a loving, caring and compassionate person!’). So, if we think in this way, we must recognise them as gifts of a peculiar sort. In a recent article that argues for Kierkegaard as a kind of virtue ethicist, Mark Tietjen suggests the following definition of a virtue according to Kierkegaard: ‘*dispositions to be achieved by works that one must strive to do in response to God’s grace, with the help of God’s grace*’.²⁶ I think we can, without violating the spirit of Kierkegaard’s thought, quite reasonably view virtues, understood in this way, as entities to be nurtured and developed.²⁷ It is in this sense that I shall argue that one can view as virtues the kinds of trust, hope and capacity for forgiveness (including self-forgiveness) to be discussed in Chapters 7 and 8.

Let us turn, then, to the overall argument that this book seeks to make.

II Chapter outlines

In Chapter 2, we begin our enquiry by exploring friendship. I argue that while Kierkegaard is far from the unequivocal enemy of friendship he is often presented as being, he is worried about friendship as an arena in which improper self-love often rears its head. But I claim that a significant part of this concern rests upon an excessive worry that friendship depends upon *likeness* between the friends. To counterbalance this, I consider what

²² Welz 2007: 268–9. ²³ Welz 2007: 284. ²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Welz 2007: 269. Welz argues that this position is perfectly consistent with such thinkers as Luther and Schleiermacher.

²⁶ Tietjen 2010: 163.

²⁷ I stop short of the claim that *Kjerlighed* itself is a virtue. For reasons for caution about such a claim, see Welz 2007: 270–2.

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Dean Cocking and Jeanette Kennett label the ‘drawing’ view of friendship as an important complement to the ‘mirror’ view prevalent in the literature on friendship. Some defenders of Kierkegaard seem to imply, somewhat grudgingly, that friendship is something that we should be ‘allowed’. But I argue that a more robust defence of friendship than this can be offered, emphasising in particular the ‘drawing’ view’s focus on the way in which I am distinctly responsive both to the other’s interests and world view, and to their way of seeing me. This quality makes it capable of providing an important bridge between love of the self and love of the neighbour. However, I also consider how *agapic* love of the neighbour might positively inform friendship.

Chapter 3 offers a more thorough exegesis of Kierkegaard’s remarks on self-love in *Works of Love*. Although a considerable majority of these references construe it in negative terms, he certainly recognises a proper self-love as valorised in the second love commandment. I shall argue that for Kierkegaard, as for Erich Fromm a century later, there is a symbiotic relationship between neighbour-love and proper self-love. But we shall also note the emphasis Kierkegaard places upon ‘self-denial’ as ‘Christianity’s essential form’ (*WL* 56/*SKS* 9 62), and that such self-denial is a crucial part of what he takes proper self-love to be. Moreover, he tends to connect the negative varieties of self-love with ‘selfishness’, including the ‘disguised selfishness’ that he associates with erotic love and friendship when they do not have neighbour-love at their heart. This will be the basis for important aspects of our critique in subsequent chapters. Chapter 3 also explores, crucially, the centrality of love of God to Kierkegaard’s conception of proper self-love. God’s role as the ‘middle term’ in love becomes vital. For Kierkegaard, one’s relation to God, others and oneself are all inextricably linked. Yet, despite first appearances, I argue that the claim is not so much that proper self-love can be *reduced* to love of God, but that God is the ‘filter’ through which all proper love, including proper self-love, must pass. Kierkegaard also claims that genuinely Christian love will be mistaken for self-love in the negative sense by ‘the world’. Through this discussion, several key worries emerge. Does Kierkegaard’s criticism of both erotic love and friendship overlook what they, at their best, can be? Does he sometimes stray dangerously close to treating humans as being of only instrumental value? Is there a fundamental incompatibility between neighbour-love and ‘preferential’ love that Kierkegaard fudges? Does he overdo the opposition between Christianity and ‘the world’? And how far should we follow him in his praise for ‘self-denial’ or self-sacrifice? I take up these questions in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

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Jamie Ferreira has noted that the alleged inability of *Works of Love*'s ethic to deal with special relationships is one of the 'most persistent criticisms' that have been made of it over the years.²⁸ In Chapter 4, I set the problem of self-love in a wider context by considering an illuminating recent dispute in the secondary literature about Kierkegaard's view of 'erotic' or romantic love (*Elskov*). This dispute – between Ferreira and Sharon Krishek – is also significant in so far as it is one important place in the recent secondary literature in which a disagreement as to the nature of proper self-love takes centre stage.

We consider two related but distinct charges. First is the problem in its starkest form: does Kierkegaard *overlook* 'special relationships' such as romantic love, viewing all others as indistinguishable neighbours, such that the distinctiveness of any given other is ignored? Many, from Theodor Adorno onwards, have accused him of this.²⁹ Or, if not, does he nevertheless *undervalue the moral importance* of distinctiveness and special relationships? I shall argue that while the former charge cannot be made to stick, the latter is a more serious problem for his account, though ultimately, I claim, not a fatal one for it.

As a way of solving the problem Krishek sees with Kierkegaard's account – of how neighbour-love and preferential loves can coincide – I argue that we should focus on the idea of God as the 'middle term' in love. Building on Chapter 3, we should understand this to mean, in significant part, that the idea of God acts as a kind of filter through which any kind of love – neighbourly as well as preferential – must pass before it is commended. A key advantage of this model is that we do not need to assume, *pace* Krishek, that the purified versions of any two manifestations of love are identical. While recognising that Krishek raises some important critical questions for Ferreira's account, I outline a possible response, based in part on Kierkegaard's idea that, like 'the law', neighbour-love is only a 'sketch' until brought to fruition in any given manifestation of concrete love. Ultimately, I claim, Kierkegaard's position can be defended from Krishek's critique. These points, as well as shedding light on our proper love for particular others, also shed light on our proper relation to ourselves – and thus advance our understanding of self-love in ways to be developed in later chapters.

What, then, of the worry that Kierkegaard treats the self as of purely instrumental value? Perhaps we need to make a more robust defence of the self, its needs and its projects than many commentators have been

²⁸ Ferreira 2001: 89. ²⁹ I briefly discuss such critiques in Chapter 2.

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willing to do. One recent attempt to do this in the context of self-love is Harry Frankfurt's in *The Reasons of Love*. Like Kierkegaard, Frankfurt aims to draw a distinction between proper and improper forms of self-love. In Chapter 5, I outline Frankfurt's account of self-love. Though I shall highlight some significant difficulties with it, some key themes emerge from a critical discussion of Frankfurt: how love entails commitment, which in turn entails some kind of appropriate self-relation; how it turns out that self-love necessarily points *outside* the self; and how love (not just for the self but for others) can involve self-interest *without* being based upon it in a 'merely selfish' way. I then consider, in Chapter 6, the suggestion made by Sylvia Walsh that Kierkegaard's account of self-love is superior to Frankfurt's on the grounds that the latter lacks a concept of self-denial.³⁰ I argue that the account of self-denial that Walsh attributes to Kierkegaard has very significant problems of its own. First, Walsh (like Ferreira, Krishek and others) relies too heavily on Kierkegaard's description of improper self-love as 'selfish', overlooking forms of such self-love that do not involve selfishness *per se*. Here I introduce Robert M. Adams's Bishop Butler-inspired distinction between selfishness and other vices of self-focus such as self-centredness. Second, and more importantly, Walsh offers on Kierkegaard's behalf such a valorisation of self-denial (e.g., the claim that '*every* demand in the relationship [between two people should be] ... placed upon oneself rather than the other') that one cannot help raising the important question raised by Outka. Does this allow 'any way to differentiate between *attention to another's needs* and *submission to his exploitation*, and any warrant for resisting the latter'?³¹ In other words, are there no limits to self-denial and self-sacrifice: do we just write the other a 'blank cheque'? Several feminist philosophers and theologians have argued convincingly against endorsing a self-sacrifice without limits. I investigate some of this work and argue that *this* Kierkegaard is one who seems open to some of the criticisms that Paul Ricoeur and others have raised against Emmanuel Levinas, as to whether the self is to remain forever hostage to the other.³² In opposition to Levinas's insistence on self-emptying obedience in the face of the summons of the other, Ricoeur insists on the need to maintain self-love and other-love in a creative tension. We should apply, I claim, something like Ricoeur's critique of Levinas to these elements of Kierkegaard. The tendency to concede too much to what we might call the 'Levinasian' element in Kierkegaard is a problem, I argue, in much

³⁰ Walsh (2009). ³¹ Outka 1972: 21.³² Levinas 1997, especially p. 112; Ricoeur 1992: 338.