

“Lewis, Kierkegaard and friendship”

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Recent years have seen a notable resurgence of interest in the philosophy of love and friendship. In this paper, I bring into dialogue two important texts that approach this topic from a Christian point of view: C. S. Lewis’s *The Four Loves* and Søren Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*. I shall argue that each thinker helpfully clarifies important points the other leaves obscure, and that Lewis (like Kierkegaard) has a significant, but largely overlooked,¹ contribution to make to contemporary work on the philosophy of love and friendship. Our discussion will incorporate the ambivalent view of friendship within the Christian tradition; the relation between friendship and Christian love; and the importance of genuine alterity to a proper understanding of love of the neighbor.

I – Background: the Christian suspicion of friendship

Friendship is, by its very nature, preferential and selective. Certain people are my friends, others are not; and we might quite reasonably claim that the person who claims to be ‘everyone’s friend’ has at best a very superficial understanding of what genuine friendship means. Yet largely because of this preference and selectivity, Christians have often been suspicious of friendship. Many early Christian thinkers worried about whether friendship and Christian love of the neighbor were not

¹ For instance, three significant and wide-ranging recent books on the philosophy of friendship – Pangle 2002; Lynch 2005; and Vernon 2005 - all pay little or no heed to Lewis.

fundamentally in conflict.² Ancient Greek and Roman thinkers such as Aristotle and Cicero held friendship in high regard, but is not the valorisation of friendship (insofar as it is a form of preferential love) in tension with the Christian injunction to love one's neighbor, where the neighbor is everyone, including one's enemies? This dilemma is important in St. Augustine, for instance. Augustine claims: 'In this world two things are essential: a healthy life and friendship' (St. Augustine, 'Sermon 299D, 1', cited in Brady 2003, 89). And yet he also warns that friendship can be dangerous. In the infamous youthful pear-stealing incident discussed in the *Confessions*, he repeatedly insists that he would not have performed this act on his own (Augustine 1961, 51-2), and suggests that the thrill stemmed from having 'partners in sin' (ibid., 52). 'This', he claims, 'was friendship of a most unfriendly sort, bewitching my mind in an inexplicable way' (ibid.) Thus Augustine illustrates a point mentioned by Aristotle and known by all parents: youngsters can be led astray by falling in with the wrong crowd.³

Søren Kierkegaard has often been viewed as an enemy of friendship, on the grounds that in *Works of Love* he allegedly sets up a stark contrast between the natural loves (erotic love and friendship) on one hand, and love for God and neighbor on the other, ultimately arguing that the former should be replaced by the latter. Numerous critics,

² For a detailed discussion of this topic in early Christianity, see White 1992.

³ Towards the end of his discussion of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle suggests that 'a friendship of bad men becomes evil; for, being fickle, bad men participate in bad pursuits, and they become evil by becoming like each other. The friendship of *good* men, on the other hand, is *good*, and it grows as their companionship continues; and they seem to become even better men by acting together and correcting each other, for each models himself on what he approves of the other.'

(Aristotle 1975, 1172a)

such as Theodor Adorno (Adorno 1939-40) and K. E. Løgstrup (Løgstrup 1997), have attacked him on these grounds, and in three very recent books on the philosophy of friendship, Kierkegaard is still presented as being friendship's unequivocal enemy. Lorraine Smith Pangle, for instance, informs her reader that 'Kierkegaard, with bold intransigence, rejects friendship as unchristian' (Pangle 2002, 3). Sandra Lynch claims that he 'dismiss[es] friendship and [erotic] love altogether, as essentially forms of idolatry or self-love' (Lynch 2005, 35). Mark Vernon goes so far as to dismiss Kierkegaard's analysis as 'one man's rant', again claiming that Kierkegaard's is 'an outright rejection of friendship as such' and that for him 'neighbor-love is wholly different from friendship' (Vernon 2005, 77-8).⁴ All three critics, in other words, make essentially the same charge against Kierkegaard as did his critics of more than half a century ago. Kierkegaard is still commonly presented as holding either or both of the following views. First, since erotic love and friendship are preferential, rather than universal, they fail the test of love of the neighbor and should therefore ultimately be dismissed. Second, since one's beloved or closest friend is simply one neighbor amongst many, one's love for one's partner or friend is ultimately no different from one's love for the stranger. In other words, it is charged, he has no room for 'preferential' love at all.

⁴ As general studies of the philosophical literature on friendship, both Lynch and Vernon's books have much to commend them. But on Kierkegaard, they have in common a surprising feature: the exclusion from the bibliography of the very text on which they base their attack on Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*. Revealingly, what both cite is the small sub-section of *Works of Love* excerpted in Pakaluk 1991. This sub-section – amounting to 12 pages in Pakaluk's book – is just one third of one of the fifteen deliberations that make up *Works of Love*.

Now, Kierkegaard does indeed claim that ‘the praise of erotic love and friendship belong to paganism’ (Kierkegaard 1995, 44) and that ‘Christianity has thrust erotic love and friendship from the throne’ (ibid.) And yet he describes erotic love [*Elskov*] as ‘undeniably life’s most beautiful happiness’ (ibid., 267) and friendship [*Venskab*] as ‘the greatest temporal good’ (ibid.). So Kierkegaard’s apparent rejection of friendship is not as clear-cut as is commonly supposed: as Jamie Ferreira has recently argued convincingly, the standard view of Kierkegaard as an enemy of friendship is a serious over-simplification (Ferreira 2001). Ferreira claims that Kierkegaard neither dismisses erotic love and friendship, nor argues that the way we relate to a spouse or a friend need be qualitatively identical to the way in which we relate to the neighbor who is a stranger. Contrary to Lynch’s claim above, what Kierkegaard actually says is that ‘the selfishness *in* preferential love’ (Kierkegaard 1995, 44) should be rooted out, not the preferential love itself. But what does this distinction amount to?

II – Lewis on friendship

It is here that C. S. Lewis helps. In his chapter on friendship in *The Four Loves*, Lewis describes friendship as ‘spiritual’, and considers the possibility that because (according to him) it is not rooted in instinct, or infected with jealousy or neediness, it might be ‘a natural love which is Love itself’ (Lewis 1960, 77). But ultimately, he rejects this view. His reasons for doing so shed light on what is left somewhat obscure in Kierkegaard and which has led to widespread misunderstanding of this aspect of the Danish thinker’s thought. What, then, are Lewis’s reasons for rejecting the view that friendship is ‘a natural love which is Love itself’?

He presents three such reasons: the suspicion of friendship typically felt by those in authority; what he calls ‘the pride of friendship’; and the significance of the fact that friendship is ‘very rarely the image under which Scripture represents the love between God and Man’ (ibid., 78).

The first two are closely connected. Common to both classical and early Christian accounts of friendship is the idea of what David Konstan describes as ‘loyalty within a community with a shared vision of life’ (Konstan 1997, 52). Relatedly, Lewis claims that ‘every real friendship is a sort of secession, even a rebellion’ (Lewis 1960, 80). This can be good or bad, depending on what is being seceded from. ‘Men who have real Friends’, claims Lewis, ‘are less easy to manage or “get at”; harder for good Authorities to correct or bad Authorities to corrupt’ (ibid.). On its negative side this signals a real danger: ‘Friendship (as the ancients saw) can be a school of virtue; but also (as they did not see) a school of vice. It is ambivalent. It makes good men better and bad men worse.’ (ibid.) (Actually, Lewis is not being fair to ‘the ancients’ here. In arguably the most celebrated discussion of friendship in the ancient world, Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle, as we saw above, makes precisely this point.⁵) But the important point for our purposes is that this ambivalent aspect of friendship is intimately related to what we might call cliquishness: ‘a wholesale indifference or deafness’ to outside opinion (Lewis 1960, 81). José Ortega y Gasset signals this as a feature of romantic love: ‘the world does not exist for the lover. His beloved has dislodged and replaced it’ (Ortega y Gasset 1959, 50). Yet what Lewis shows us is that a subtler version of the same danger is present in friendship. Note that this is not necessarily the siege mentality of some group that views itself as a persecuted sect.

⁵ See note 3 above.

What Lewis calls ‘the pride of Friendship’ is nicely illustrated by the following example. Lewis describes being at a conference at which two clergymen,

‘obviously close friends, began talking about “uncreated energies” other than God. I asked how there could be any uncreated things except God if the Creed was right in calling Him “the maker of all things visible and invisible.” Their reply was to glance at one another and laugh. I had no objection to their laughter, but I wanted an answer in words as well. It was not at all a sneering or unpleasant laugh. It expressed what Americans would express by saying “Isn’t he cute?” It was like the laughter of jolly grown-ups when an *enfant terrible* asks the sort of question that is never asked. You can hardly imagine how inoffensively it was done, nor how clearly it conveyed the impression that they were fully aware of living habitually on a higher plane than the rest of us ... Very possibly they had an answer to my question and knew that I was too ignorant to follow it. If they had said in so many words, “I’m afraid it would take too long to explain”, I would not be attributing to them the pride of Friendship. The glance and the laugh are the real point – the audible and visible embodiment of a corporate superiority taken for granted and unconcealed.’

(Lewis 1960, 83-4)

We have all encountered our own versions of what he is talking about. This is simply (what Lewis calls) an ‘olympian’ version of something which comes in more offensive varieties, such as the ‘very loud and vulgar friends’ who seek ‘to impress mere strangers in a bar or railway carriage’ by talking ‘very intimately and esoterically in order to be overheard. Everyone who is not in the circle must be shown that he is not in it. Indeed the Friendship may be “about” almost nothing except the

fact that it excludes.’ (ibid., 85) (One wonders what Lewis would make of the era of cell-phones, the sole point of which sometimes seems to be to say “Look at me; even when I’m on my own, I don’t want for friends”.)

The overall point is this. The danger of the ‘pride of friendship’ is that ‘it is almost inseparable from Friendly love’. Both Kierkegaard and Lewis see that friendship must exclude, insofar as it is preferential. Yet what Lewis shows more clearly than does Kierkegaard is the way in which we may here be on a slippery slope: ‘From the innocent and necessary act of excluding to the spirit of exclusiveness is an easy step; and thence to the degrading pleasure of exclusiveness’ (ibid., 86). At the bottom of this slope, ‘[t]he common vision which first brought us together may fade quite away. We shall be a coterie that exists for the sake of being a coterie; a little self-elected (and therefore absurd) aristocracy, basking in the moonshine of our collective self-approval’ (ibid.) Let’s not try to deny that churches and other Christian groups are sometimes guilty of this, being brought together as an ‘us’ against a ‘them’ (forgetting arguably the central lesson of ‘love of the neighbor’, that ‘they’ are our neighbors too).

III – Charity, self-love and the natural loves

Both Kierkegaard and Lewis are interested in the relation between friendship and Christian charity or love of the neighbor. In the chapter of *The Four Loves* on charity, Lewis considers the natural loves as rivals to the love of God. But for most of us, he claims, the major problem is not with the rivalry between the human other and God, but between the human other and the self. ‘It is dangerous’, Lewis suggests, ‘to press

upon a man the danger of getting beyond earthly love when his real difficulty lies in getting so far' (Lewis 1960, 118). But here is where Kierkegaard clarifies a point somewhat overlooked by Lewis, since Kierkegaard's comments on friendship show that this opposition between self-love and love of the human other may in fact be a false opposition. Let us see how.

Friendship as disguised self-love

In the second deliberation of *Works of Love* Kierkegaard expresses his worry about friendship as follows:

‘erotic love and friendship are the very peak of self-esteem, the *I* intoxicated in the *other I*. The more securely one *I* and another *I* join to become one *I*, the more this united *I* selfishly cuts itself off from everyone else. At the peak of erotic love and friendship, the two actually do become one self, one *I*.’

(Kierkegaard 1995, 56)

In other words, the problem is that friendship might be selfishness in disguise. Kierkegaard's real worry about friendship, in a nutshell, is the way in which we often turn the other into ‘another me’ (cf. Ferreira 2001, 8). Here we might worry about the focus, in many classical discussions of friendship, on the importance of likeness or unity of worldview between the friends, and the image of the friend as a ‘second self’.⁶ By contrast, the neighbor, for Kierkegaard, brings us up against genuine alterity: the neighbor is ‘what thinkers call “the other,” that by which the selfishness

⁶ For a more detailed discussion of this, see Lippitt (forthcoming).

in self-love is to be tested' (Kierkegaard 1995, 21). Friendship is what Kierkegaard calls 'selfish self-love' in disguise when the other is seen simply as an extension of the self; when the other is viewed under the aspect of 'that which is useful to, or complements, me'. Friendship avoids this only when the other's alterity is respected; when, instead of reducing the friend simply to what is good for me, I relate to them as a genuine other.

In other words, just as we saw Lewis's comments on friendship clarify a potential unclarity in Kierkegaard, so Kierkegaard's concern about how friendship might often be selfishness in disguise shows how Lewis misses an important implication of his insightful remarks about friendship's potential descent into exclusory cliquishness. If in friendship I seek 'another me', or view the friend instrumentally (as someone who is useful to me in pursuit of my goals), then I may disguise to myself the sense in which my apparent love for the human other who is my friend is in fact just selfishness in disguise. Thus the distinction between 'earthly loves' and (the wrong kind of) self-love may not be as clear cut as Lewis's discussion implies.

Lewis contra St. Augustine: Christian charity versus Stoic apatheia

Lewis claims that the natural loves need God in order to be what they are at their best. At this point, in rejecting one possible view of the dangers of loving our fellow creatures too much, Lewis makes – almost as an aside – a point more important and more profound than it at first seems.

The view he rejects is that of St Augustine. (Lewis's disagreement with Augustine on this is significant since, according to Gilbert Meilaender, Lewis's understanding of our nature as human beings is 'deeply Augustinian in its basic contours' (Meilaender 1998, vii).) In his *Confessions*, Augustine movingly describes the desolation into which he fell on the death of a close friend. The moral of this story, he claims, is the danger and folly of giving your heart to anything but God. Every man lives in misery whose 'soul is tethered by the love of things that cannot last' (Augustine 1961, 77). When – inevitably – he loses them, he is 'agonized', and '[o]nly then does he realise the sorry state he is in, and was in even before his loss' (ibid.) Augustine cautions: 'If the things of this world delight you, praise God for them but turn your love away from them and give it to their Maker' (ibid., 82). Indeed, he argues that things have their beauty as parts of a whole (ibid., 80), and '[i]n this world one thing passes away so that another may take its place and the whole be preserved in all its parts' (ibid., 81). Thus, as Lewis glosses Augustine, if love is to be 'a blessing not a misery, it must be for the only Beloved who will never pass away' (Lewis 1960, 120).

Despite his great admiration for Augustine, Lewis differs profoundly with him on this point. I think that Lewis is right. Here is what he says about Augustine's advice:

'Of course this is excellent sense. Don't put your goods in a leaky vessel. Don't spend too much on a house you may be turned out of. And there is no man alive who responds more naturally than I to such canny maxims. I am a safety-first creature. Of all arguments against love none makes so strong an appeal to my nature as "Careful! This might lead you to suffering."' (ibid.)

But, he adds, the appeal of this way of thinking is to his nature, not his conscience:

‘When I respond to that appeal I seem to myself to be a thousand miles away from Christ. If I am sure of anything I am sure that His teaching was never meant to confirm my congenital preference for safe investments and limited liabilities. I doubt whether there is anything in me that pleases him less. And who could conceivably begin to love God on such a prudential ground – because the security (so to speak) is better? Who could even include it among the grounds for loving? Would you choose a wife or a Friend – if it comes to that, would you choose a dog – in this spirit? One must be outside the world of love, of all loves, before one thus calculates. Eros, lawless Eros, preferring the Beloved to happiness, is more like Love himself than this.’ (ibid., 120-1)

Lewis suggests that this aspect of Augustine’s thought is ‘closer to Stoic “apathy” [*apatheia*] or neo-Platonic mysticism than to charity’ (ibid., 121), pointing out that Christ ‘wept over Jerusalem and at the grave of Lazarus’ (ibid.) Rejecting what he takes to be Augustine’s counsel, Lewis instead observes:

‘To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will almost certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become

unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation.’ (ibid.)

This leads Lewis to venture that ‘the most lawless and inordinate loves are less contrary to God’s will than a self-invited and self-protective lovelessness ... We shall draw nearer to God, not by trying to avoid the sufferings inherent in all loves, but by accepting them and offering them to Him; throwing away all defensive armour’ (Lewis 1960, 122).

This seems to me to be right. To love is *necessarily* to put oneself in a position of vulnerability; the quest for risk-free love is a wild goose chase.⁷ However, I would add that Lewis’s final point needs to be supplemented. It is not only that we should ‘accept and offer to God’ our natural loves, but that we should recognise that they can be *from* God. (Elsewhere, Lewis seems to recognise this, but he does not emphasise it at this point of his discussion, and he does not consider the tradition of Christian ‘spiritual friendships’.⁸) To supplement and clarify this point, let us return to Kierkegaard.

⁷ Another comparison with Kierkegaard suggests itself here. Throughout his writings, Kierkegaard draws analogies between love and religious faith. And in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Johannes Climacus famously describes faith – ‘the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty’- as like being ‘out on 70,000 fathoms of water’, arguing that without risk, there can be no faith (Kierkegaard 1992, 204).

⁸ See, for instance, the essay of the twelfth century Cistercian Aelred of Rievaulx (in Pakaluk 1991, 131-45).

IV - Kierkegaard, love and vulnerability

In a recent book (Furtak 2005), Rick Furtak has attempted to use Kierkegaard's work to oppose the ancient Stoic idea that a rational human being should avoid the emotions. The Stoics pull few punches on this: 'Expel the passions entirely', demands Seneca (Seneca, Letter 116, cited in Furtak 2005, 24); while Epictetus recommends his reader to: 'Purify your judgments, lest something that is not your own may be attached to you ... which may hurt when it is torn away' (Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.1.111-112, cited in Furtak 2005, 25). In the latter case, the recommended procedure is to start with a pot or cup, and via horses and pieces of land, to eventually work your way up to your child, wife and brothers. Everything and everyone is renounced as ultimately unimportant.

Contrary to this, central to Furtak's argument is that the world attains its very significance for us through our having towards it an attitude of love (Furtak 2005, 97): 'a loving attitude ... disposes us toward a charitable interpretation of external reality' (ibid., 100). Furtak suggests that the significance of the fact that humans are loving or caring beings is typically underestimated. Each of us develops a distinct self by forming bonds of love or care; indeed, he suggests, 'without love, it would be impossible for the self to gain access to the values that orient its moral existence' (ibid., 122).

Moreover, Kierkegaard claims, in a lyrical passage, that human love originates mysteriously in divine love:

‘Just as the quiet lake originates deep down in hidden springs no eye has ever seen, so also does a person’s love originate even more deeply in God’s love. If there were no gushing spring at the bottom, if God were not love, then there would be neither the little lake nor a human being’s love. Just as the quiet lake originates darkly in the deep spring, so a human being’s love originates mysteriously in God’s love.’ (Kierkegaard 1995, 9-10)

This possibility radically alters our perspective. We have seen that one major worry amongst Christian writers on friendship and the other natural loves - including Kierkegaard and Lewis - is that these natural loves might act as rivals to our love of God. But there are also suggestions in both that *agape* or *caritas* completes, rather than competes with, the natural loves.

For Kierkegaard, love is fundamental in the sense that the *need* for and to love is grounded in the nature of human beings. Furtak glosses this point as follows:

‘it is one of Kierkegaard’s most important points that diverse forms of love can be traced to a common origin, such that the “truest” kind of love does not need to abolish drives and inclinations but only to refine these crude expressions of the one “fundamental universal love” into a more unselfish kind.’ (Furtak 2005, 102)

Two important points follow, for our purposes, about all this. First, we need to be sure not to take too sentimental a view of love. Kierkegaard, Lewis, Martha Nussbaum, Furtak and others all point, in various ways, to the possibility of *suffering* as a

necessary consequence of loving. Both the Stoics and St. Augustine are correct to see that truly to love or care is to make oneself vulnerable to the possibility of such suffering. But note that in accepting this and (unlike the Stoics) genuinely loving regardless, we follow the pattern of that divine love that, in David Gouwens' words, 'freely chooses avoidable suffering' (Gouwens 1996, 170; cited in Furtak 2005, 112); in other words, we follow Christ.

Second, we noted earlier Lewis's remark that Scripture tends not to use friendship as the image for the relation between man and God. There are hints in Lewis's 'guess' as to why not of an idea developed further by later writers. David Konstan, for example, suggests that early Christian writers who avoided the terms *philia* and *amicitia* did so, in significant part, because of the classical world's association between friendship and virtue, and the thought that this brought with it 'an unwelcome hint of pride' (Konstan 1997, 156). However, it is important to note, *pace* Lewis, that several of the early Christians *did* use friendship to illustrate the idea of Christian love. White notes that 'early Christians felt a need to supplement this love [*agape/caritas*] or to explain it in terms of certain of the characteristics traditionally associated with *philia/amicitia*' (White 1992, 56). (For Thomas Aquinas, indeed, charity is 'the friendship of man for God' (Thomas Aquinas 1947, II-II q. 23).)

Perhaps we can now see why. What is important about the idea that *agape* or *caritas* completes rather than opposes the natural loves is that on this picture, a love for God and neighbor, in the right conditions, can *grow out of* these natural loves. Could not these natural loves be a means of grace? Furtak's discussion reveals how there is an even worse possibility than that a person's natural loves may be a rival to their love of

God: it is that they may not love at all. In doing so, Furtak helps us to see what might be right about Lewis's suggestion that 'the most lawless and inordinate loves are less contrary to God's will than a self-invited and self-protective lovelessness' (Lewis 1960, 122). The problem with Stoic apathy is that a person adopting this outlook puts himself in a position in which the roots from which love of God and neighbor can grow have insufficient water. And in doing so, he puts himself in the position of the disintegration of the personality that Lewis hints at when he speaks of the 'damnation' of having an unbreakable heart (Lewis 1960, 121). But this reveals a further important point that grows naturally out of Lewis's worries about friendship and his scepticism about this aspect of Augustine.

V - Treating the other as genuine other: love of the neighbor as love of an individual

One common view of the friend, since the ancients, has been as a 'second self'. Though there are perhaps subtler manifestations of this term that avoid this charge, what worries Kierkegaard about this, as mentioned earlier, is the tendency of such a picture to reduce the friend to 'another me'. In the deliberation 'Our duty to love the people we see', Kierkegaard insists on the duty to love people 'as they are' (Kierkegaard 1995, 166), 'to love precisely the person one sees' (ibid., 173). As he puts it,

'in loving the actual individual person it is important that one does not substitute an imaginary idea of how we think or could wish that this person

should be. The one who does this does not love the person he sees but again something unseen, his own idea or something similar' (ibid., 164).

This links Kierkegaard and Lewis with Emmanuel Levinas, the figure who perhaps more than any other recent philosopher has become noted for teaching us the importance of not reducing the other to the same, to 'another me'. Relating to the other as genuine other (*autrui*) – for our purposes, read 'the neighbor' - opens up the possibility that the other can be challenging or even 'traumatizing' (Critchley 2002, 13), not least because the other is 'always in excess of whatever idea I may have of [them]' (ibid., 14).⁹ In other words, I cannot reduce any given other to my preconceived ideas of them. Rather than reducing the neighbor to an instance of a general category, perhaps only by treating him or her as a genuine other in this sense do we truly fulfil the second love commandment.

Let me explain. What is important about this is the idea that love - including love of the neighbor - is always the love of an individual. (This is Kierkegaard's major criticism of Plato's idea of love (see Furtak 2005, 103).) There is good reason to be critical, like Lewis, of the Augustinian idea that 'all things apart from God are to be loved for the sake of something else rather than for their own sake' (White 1992, 199). For this fails to recognise an important distinction: between loving someone as an instantiation of some property and loving someone as a particular individual. The

⁹ According to Critchley, for Levinas ethics is 'the critical putting into question of the liberty, spontaneity and cognitive emprise of the ego that seeks to reduce all otherness to itself. Ethics is the location of a point of otherness, or ... "exteriority", that cannot be reduced to the same' (Critchley 2002, 15). Note how similar this idea is to the above quotes from Kierkegaard.

danger is that our talk of love of the neighbor all too easily fails to respect this division: ‘the neighbor’, far from being this particular person here, becomes an instantiation of the general category ‘neighbor’. But to love at all, we might venture, involves seeing the person who is the object of one’s love as an irreplaceable individual. And this is just as true when that person is one’s neighbor as when he or she is one’s romantic beloved or friend. There is a crucial difference, then, between seeing the neighbor as this flesh and blood individual here, and seeing them as ‘he or she who must be helped’ or ‘he or she who must be converted’. (It follows from this that we should be very uneasy about any kind of evangelism that treats complex human others as simply units of potential convertibility.) One thing we can learn from the natural love that is friendship at its best, then, is this crucial lesson: that to love one’s neighbor, too, is to love an individual.¹⁰

VI - Conclusion

Our discussion may at first glance seem to have come some way from Lewis, but in fact, I don’t think it has. In the introduction to *The Four Loves*, discussing nearness to God, Lewis distinguishes two kinds of nearness: nearness by likeness and nearness of approach. According to Lewis, we are closest to God in the latter sense when we are most unlike Him in the former sense, insofar as we recognise our creaturely *need* for

¹⁰ Note that has implications for what Christopher Cordner calls ‘abstract charity’: ‘when charity is institutional and indirect it can become abstract and disengaged from those who need it’; insofar as the ‘quality of attention’ to others lacks the form of love manifested in the kindness and tenderness one associates with actual encounter. (See Cordner 2002, 115.) The reference to ‘actual encounter’ recalls Levinas’s emphasis on the ‘face’ of the other.

our Creator (Lewis 1960, 4-6).¹¹ Perhaps, similarly, we attain the nearness of approach that is love of our neighbor when we realise, and are ‘challenged’ by, their genuine alterity. And even if we have strayed some way from Lewis’s original text, the fact that I have been inspired to think about these issues by Lewis’s *The Four Loves* is testimony to the deceptive power of this unassuming yet profound little book.

¹¹ As Kierkegaard puts this in the title of a discourse: ‘To need God is a human being’s highest perfection’ (Kierkegaard 1990, 297-326).

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