Finally we have a book by an avowed Kierkegaardian who is willing to call her mentor’s hand regarding the concept of love that he developed in *Works of Love*. What makes this refreshing and unusual is that Sharon Krishek (SK) presents us with a critique of Kierkegaard’s (SK’s) view of love that is based on Kierkegaard’s view of faith.

The burden of Sharon Krishek’s new book is to show that Kierkegaard was mistaken in his tendency to denigrate what he calls preferential love in general, and romantic love in particular. She undertakes her critique by calling into question Kierkegaard’s glorification of neighbor love as the only truly perfect, the only truly Christian love. She thinks he was mistaken to draw such a sharp dichotomy (paving the way for Nygren et al.) because it led him toward a tendency (not always consistently followed) of condemning romantic love as essentially morally inferior to neighbor love.

Unlike other Kierkegaardians, Krishek makes no attempt to rescue Kierkegaard from what she takes to be his mistaken devaluation of romantic love. Others have suggested that Kierkegaard does not make this mistake and offer interpretations that try to show that on a proper reading it is clear that he really granted romantic love its proper due. A good portion of the book undertakes what I think is a successful critique of such efforts, including the most recent one, namely, Jamie Ferriera’s book, *Love’s Grateful Striving*.

Krishek makes no bones about it: Kierkegaard was mistaken in not giving romantic love its proper role in the life of faith. And here we find the key to her way to correct Kierkegaard’s mistake. As Krishek contends, Kierkegaard’s failure was in not seeing that romantic love, which clearly fascinated him in his early writings, not to mention in his own life, is a relationship that mirrors the structure of faith. So she turns to *Fear...*
and Trembling to show that Kierkegaard’s concept of faith developed in that work, namely, his idea of it as a relation that involves a double movement, offers us a way of thinking about romantic love as itself an expression of faith, and thus a way of avoiding Kierkegaard’s unfortunate devaluation of it.

Kierkegaard was clearly impressed by the Christian aversion to selfishness, to what he sometimes calls the sin of self-love. For some reason he had come to believe that Christianity represented an astonishing advance over paganism, and indeed over every other religious faith, insofar as it alone offered the only legitimate path to redemption from this sin of selfishness, this most deadly of sins. (It is unclear why he held to the uniqueness of Christianity in opposing selfishness, for such a belief is demonstrably false. But I digress.) For Kierkegaard this unique path of redemption from selfishness is the Christian path of neighbor love (agape).

As he understood it, the centerpiece of neighbor love is self-denial, just as the centerpiece of preferential love is self-affirmation. And even though Kierkegaard says that we must love our neighbors as ourselves, and even though he attempts to distinguish between proper and selfish self-love, Krishek is correct that the overall impact of his emphasis on self-denial does not finally give self-affirmation, self-fulfillment, its due. Such self-affirmation finally gets identified with what Kierkegaard takes to be the intrinsic selfishness of preferential love, just as self-denial gets identified exclusively with neighbor love.

Krishek’s view is that while Kierkegaard is clearly right to think that self-fulfillment is an intrinsic element in preferential love, he is wrong to think that preferential love does not also involve self-denial. In authentic romantic love, for example, the lover gives up (resigns) self-interest for the sake of the interest and needs of the beloved. As well, Kierkegaard is wrong to think that neighbor love does not involve an element of self-affirmation. Krishek contends that the self-denial neighbor love requires does not make it self-less. A full account of such a neighbor love must also see that there is room in it for self-affirmation, that it is natural to feel a sense of joy and satisfaction in helping my neighbor. As Krishek puts it:

The self here is involved in a way that exceeds the bounds of self-denial: it is involved in a self-regarding kind of way. Hence, strictly speaking, this kind of attachment may seem, from a point of view such as that of Works of Love, even to contradict the duty to deny the self. However, the double structure of faith, here applied to love, allows this combination; the self who loves both renounces himself and affirms himself. Accordingly, his renewed relationship—not only with his ‘preferred’ neighbors but with every single neighbor—has a more coherent quality of completeness. (152–153)

So Krishek’s innovative suggestion is that by Kierkegaard’s own lights, we do not have to follow him in thinking that we must choose between self-denial and self-affirmation, or rank neighbor love as morally higher than preferential love because it alone is unselfish. As Krishek has it, romantic love especially, but other attachments of preference as well, need not exclude self-denial, and hence need not be selfish. Moreover, neighbor love which does not exclude self-affirmation need not be self-less.