Kierkegaard's Responsibility to the Others:  
Friendship, Neighbourliness, and the Problem of Sociality

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Given his attention to the existential elements of our existence, it is not surprising that Søren Kierkegaard offers us an account of friendship. Like much of Kierkegaard's thought, the account is insightful, rigorous, and uncompromising. Kierkegaard entertains the idea of friendship, as those who have theorised and praised this form of sociality promote it as a forum in which a genuine and ethical concern with the other can be fostered. In this sense, friendship can be considered to be an ‘alternative’ response to the other. Kierkegaard challenges this understanding. What is particularly striking about Kierkegaard's reconstruction and criticisms of the traditional account of friendship is that he finds it deficient not only from the lights of his own Christian viewpoint; he also finds friendship deficient when judged from its own self-proclaimed ethical foundations. Thus, Kierkegaard concludes that the reciprocity involved in friendship actually betrays its essential selfishness. In considering Kierkegaard's account of friendship this paper argues that Kierkegaard's criticisms of friendship make serious difficulties for the traditional understanding of friendship, an understanding which stretches back to the Ancients. However, the paper also argues that Kierkegaard's alternative, 'neighbourliness', is constructed in such a way as to be insufficiently grounded in human sociality and perhaps comes to represent an empty formalism towards the other. It concludes that whilst Kierkegaard's thought opens up a space for a sociality based on the responsibility to others, Kierkegaard fails to occupy this space. Despite this failure, Kierkegaard sets the task for any future theorisation of friendship as a centre for responsibility towards self and others.

Of all the thinkers to have emerged from Europe in the nineteenth century, Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55) is both one of the most influential and distinctive. Kierkegaard is influential not only because of the impact in inheritance of his thought and work in the 1900s (first through existentialism, and currently through various streams of postmodernism)¹, but also because of the sheer breadth of his concerns which explore themes in philosophy, theology, literary criticism, psychology, and politics. Kierkegaard is distinctive not simply because of his use of the Danish language and his perspective of the questions of Europe from Copenhagen, but also because Kierkegaard’s literature uses the strategy of pseudonyms, and is also designed to

bring the reader to the consideration and resolution of one central problem: **what does it mean to be and act as a human being?** For Kierkegaard there was only one possible resolution of this question: to be a human being is to recognise ourselves as others as spiritual equals constituted by God, and thus to **choose** to live as Christians.

However, despite his acclaimed focus on the existential aspects of human life, it has sometimes been thought that Kierkegaard has little to say about ethical existence as such— and even less about questions of sociality and the political. Fortunately contemporary scholars are beginning to redress this imbalance and (although Kierkegaard cannot be considered to be a political theorist), Kierkegaard’s social and political thought is now receiving the attention that it deserves. Thus, whilst Kierkegaard might have written for ‘that Single Individual’ he was by no means an individualist. Whilst Kierkegaard was clearly interested in commenting on **what** it means to be a human being, he was also (and necessarily) concerned with the dynamics of society which disguise, confuse, and thwart the task of understanding and becoming a human being. In this respect, Kierkegaard is continuously concerned to work-out, or perhaps more correctly ‘play-out’, the logic and dynamics of a whole host of human relationships. This is clear in both his ‘signed’ authorship, and in the authorship of the pseudonyms. The point of this concern is to illustrate to his reader the inadequacies and ultimate bankruptcy of alternatives to a correctly constituted Christian life. It is in this light that Kierkegaard turn his attention to an analysis of friendship.

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6 Kierkegaard, **Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits**, p.4.


8 The ‘problem’ of bringing his reader to the point of accepting Christianity and choosing to become a Christian was a complex one for Kierkegaard, and involved a battle on two fronts. Initially he had to
Kierkegaard’s most sustained analysis of friendship is set out in his book of 1847, *Works of Love* (henceforth simply *Works*). Although this is a Christian polemic it is much more than this. What the writings of this period are especially concerned with is the individual’s relations with others in a socio-political setting. What Kierkegaard attempts in *Works* is to show how Christian relations should be constituted. It is important to note here that Kierkegaard links the external relations that an individual forms with others directly to the inward relationship between the individual and God. For Kierkegaard, human beings have the potential to recognize themselves as spiritual selves. As such they should be properly related to God (as their creator and the source of their being), as well as to all others who are to be recognised and treated first-and-foremost as spiritual equals. Such a relationship Kierkegaard describes as the relationship of the *neighbour*.

Failure to recognize ourselves and others as spiritual equals who should be correctly constituted with our spiritual relationship to God is the misrelation of despair.

This account of spiritual selfhood is crucial to understanding Kierkegaard’s writings as a whole, and it could even be described as the ontological fact of Kierkegaard’s thought. However, whilst it is Kierkegaard’s intention to promote the ‘neighbour’ as the ideal response to the other, he does not simply assume that his reader will understand what this means—even if they believe themselves to be a Christian reading a Christian polemic. As is the strategy of Kierkegaard’s authorship as a whole, Kierkegaard does not simply present his case, instead he entertains and undermines the strongest alternative to his own case. In *Works* the strongest alternative to neighbourliness (as a response to others) is an understanding of ‘love’
considered through the relationships of ‘romantic love’ and ‘ethical friendship’. Thus, what is particularly interesting about Kierkegaard’s account of friendship is not just that he finds this form of sociality lacking from his Christian perspective, but that (unlike many of his contemporaries), he takes this phenomena or ideal seriously as a forum for an authentic response to, and responsibility for, the Other. Moreover, that Kierkegaard finds difficulties with friendship raises serious problems for those who have advocated friendship as an ethical and political ideal, and those who would seek to understand and utilise the relationship in contemporary times.

Having made these initial comments, we can now turn our attention to a reconstruction of the account of friendship that Kierkegaard offers in Works. As has been indicated, initially we will hold Kierkegaard’s account of spiritual selfhood in brackets, and concentrate on his account of secular or non-Christian friendship. However, ultimately we will see how we must return to this spiritual account of the self to complete Kierkegaard’s examination of friendship and relations with others. Although Kierkegaard’s account of friendship is infused with his own Christian concerns it is possible to draw-out three main features or aspects of friendship which structure his account as a whole: (1) friendship is characterised by preference or partiality; (2) friendship is characterised by drives and inclinations; (3) friendship is dependent upon reciprocity, and is ultimately selfish.

**Preference and Partiality**

Early in his account of friendship Kierkegaard claims that one of the defining features of friendship is that it is **preferential**. It is this feature that allows Kierkegaard to make another initial move: associating friendship with erotic love. Kierkegaard writes that:

> The same holds true of friendship as erotic love, inasmuch as this, too, is based on preference: to love this one person above all others, to love him in contrast to all others. Therefore the object of both erotic love and friendship has preference’s name, “the beloved,” “the friend,” who is loved in contrast to the whole world.

By highlighting this feature of friendship Kierkegaard is able to portray the relationship as one that has its potential for extension and inclusiveness severely limited. For Kierkegaard this is necessarily the case because the preferential nature of friendship involves the individual contrasting his friend ‘to all others’, and even loving him in ‘contrast to the whole world’. Additionally, the friend is “chosen” as the friend from all possible persons whom one might correspond with in this relationship. As such Kierkegaard’s claims concerning preference do not entail the

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14 Whilst we might consider Kierkegaard’s account to be slightly dramatic in its expression here, it also seems to ring true. It is not difficult to accept the notion that in friendship the friends show partiality towards each other in contrast to those who are not involved in the friendship. Of course, this does not mean that the friends necessarily or deliberately seek to undermine the claims and rights of others, or even act in an uncivil or uncaring way towards others. It merely means that the friends choose to act in an especially caring way towards each other.
exclusion of the world. However, they do point to the logic of preference if a person was confronted with such a choice. Thus, it is important to note here that preference in-and-of-itself does not exclude an authentic repose to the other; Indeed, it might even create special responsibilities to that other.

So, Kierkegaard’s initial claim that friendship is preferential is not one that would raise particular controversy in itself, at least not if we assume that whilst friendship might create a special responsibility towards the other, it need not also over-ride or devalue responsibilities to all others (at least not prima facie). However, the particular direction in which Kierkegaard develops his account of this feature is less than uncontroversial. The first is to claim that the ‘preference’ of friendship does in fact develop to the exclusion of others. What is more, the ‘preference’ of friendship is actually a preference for the human aspects of the friend. In short, it is not the other person understood as a self that is admired, but a particular set of features of that self. In saying this, we must bear in mind that Kierkegaard has a specific understanding of the self as a spiritual equal before God. In addition, the friend does not simply admire the other’s self as such (or aspects of that self) but they are concerned that their friend will admire and relate to them. In short, the preference of friendship must be reciprocal. Without active reciprocity the friendship will perish. This is particularly problematic not only because it is exclusionary, but also because it is subject to change. Kierkegaard points out that the poet seeks to ‘join’ the friends in their relationship, and that friendship is praised precisely because the friends promise to remain true to each other in eternity. This adds a new dimension to Kierkegaard’s early observation that the friends prefer each other in contrast to the whole world. From Kierkegaard’s point of view, the focus of the friend’s relationship dooms the relationship as the friends cannot secure themselves against change, and so the ideal of remaining true to the friend cannot be achieved. The friends cannot secure themselves against change not only because they are a part of the temporal sphere where change is inevitable, but because what they really admire about each other is not the other person as such, but some specific and particular human features of the other person.

15 As we have seen Kierkegaard associates friendship with erotic love on account of the preference that both display. It is this preference that makes both relationships the subject of the poet’s admiration (Works of Love p.19, 46). It is important to stress here that although friendship and erotic love are associated and share many features in Kierkegaard’s account, he does not claim that they are actually the same on account of this. They remain as distinct relationships even though they are both placed under the general category of ‘poetic love’. However, it is the partiality of friendship (that the poets celebrate) that becomes the focus of Kierkegaard’s attack. Kierkegaard has two strands to this attack.

16 Works of Love, pp.52, 56-57.
17 Works of Love, pp.34, 54-55.
20 The focus on the specificity of the other person opens space for Kierkegaard’s second line of attack which we will explore presently. To anticipate, Kierkegaard moves from the specific focus on the other person to claim that this focus betrays friendship as being selfish. Kierkegaard attaches various degrees of ‘depth’ to this claim. For Kierkegaard the preference in reflecting love of some feature of the other ultimately leads back to the love of the human self. Friends relate only to the other as specific human selves. They do so by making the friendship the highest good: but can do so only at the expense of a correct formulation of their own self. That the friends do this is brought to our
Drives and Inclination

The second feature of Kierkegaard’s account of friendship is that it is based upon ‘drives and inclinations’. As with ‘preference’ this second feature of friendship is held in common with romantic love. Kierkegaard’s claim here is that both relationships are sourced not in choice (rational or otherwise) or in ethical direction and decision, but are founded upon forces within the emotional life of the individual. The individual therefore exercises little (if any) control over the appearance or evaporation of emotion. As such, the individual cannot manipulate or direct the intensity or development of the sentiment. Indeed, the individual is subject to the purely human emotion. Thus, for Kierkegaard three areas of concern arise from this feature of friendship: (1) that the friendship contains no moral task; (2) that friendship is prone to instability; and that (3) the passion involved in friendship is rooted in selfishness. We shall deal with the first two of these claims in this section. The third claim will lead us into our next section, ‘selfishness and reciprocity’.

Kierkegaard’s first concern is that friendship’s feature of ‘drives and inclinations’ betrays friendship as simply a stroke of luck or good fortune. As Kierkegaard writes:

Erotic love and friendship, as the poet understand them, contain no moral task. Erotic love and friendship are good fortune. In the poetic sense, it is a stroke of good fortune… to find this one and only friend. At most, then, the task is to be properly grateful for one’s good fortune. But the task can never be to be obliged to find the beloved or to find this friend…

Kierkegaard’s point here is that it is certainly desirable to find a friend, but that friendship itself is little more than simply ‘desirable’. It is true that friendship places ethical demands upon us, but it is not an ethical demand to seek friendship. Friendship is removed from the sphere of ethical activity not because it involves attention by Kierkegaard’s reminder that philosophers call the friend the ‘other self’ or ‘other I’ (Works of Love p.53).

21 Works of Love, pp.44, 45, 49, 52.
22 This account of the emotional life of individuals is both fairly intuitive and perhaps widely accepted. It is not difficult to recognise the force and intensity of emotions, even if we also wish to claim that their demands and affects can and should be balanced or diminished when we judge and act. We can also agree that in our common understanding of friendship we assume that the friends have some form of emotional attachment to each other. Indeed, the terms “friendly”, “liking” and “affection” are closely related and (in some contexts) even synonymous with each other. Indeed, it is either comic or tragic to utter the phrases that “we do not like our friends” or that “our friends bring us no pleasure”.
24 Works of Love, pp.50-1.
26 Works of Love, pp.55-5.
27 Works of Love, pp.50-1.
drives and inclinations as such, but because those drives and inclinations do not and cannot constitute an ethical task. It cannot be the case that we should seek the friend as we cannot be obligated to foster and demonstrate emotions over which we have no control. Conversely, even if it were possible that we could be asked to seek and choose our friends, it does not follow that there is a friend to actually seek and choose. From this point of view, then, friendship is simply a beneficial coincidence.

The second area of concern is Kierkegaard’s claim that because friendship is based on ‘inclination’ it is subject to instability.29 For example, Kierkegaard claims that:

Spontaneously love can be changed from itself, it can be changed over the years, and is frequently enough seen. The love loses its ardour, its joy, its desire, its originality, its freshness.30

For Kierkegaard any sociality or response to others, which is based purely upon drives and inclinations, is subject to change and dissolution. The passion which animates the friendship might wane; indeed, it might even turn into hate. If these events were to occur then the friendship would close. This observance is one which is familiar to us, and a part of everyday experience. Friendships form and dissolve, sometimes acrimoniously, but more often imperceptibly. However, Kierkegaard’s account goes deeper than these common-place these observations. It is Kierkegaard’s claim that this feature of friendship not only has the potential to lead to instability, but that it actually makes the relationship inherently volatile and unstable. This is because both friends fear this change and cannot be sure that it will not occur despite assurances that they both might give to the contrary.31 The true test of the love in friendship can only be eternity. This makes true friendship a riddle as this is precisely the test that the friends wish for, but cannot wish for; it is this test that the friends seek to apply, but cannot never wish to apply. As Kierkegaard comments, the desire to test the friendship betrays the fact that the friends are uncertain in their relationship;32 Yet without such a test the friends cannot be secure.

Here we might challenge Kierkegaard’s account of this feature of friendship in two distinct ways. The first is to draw out some of the logical possibilities of what Kierkegaard claims; possibilities that he does not seem to entertain himself. The second is to compare Kierkegaard’s account of friendship to that of the Classical philosophers, and especially the paradigmatic model set up by Aristotle.33 By doing

29 Works of Love, p.32, 34, 36-40.
30 Works of Love, p.36.
31 Works of Love, p.3. Indeed, fear of change and betrayal in friendship is a common theme in the history of the idea itself. Aristotle raises it, Nicomachean Ethics, pp.243-4; It is clearly a concern of Plutarch in his ‘How One May Distinguish between Flatterer and Friend’; It is reflected in Bacon’s somewhat instrumental account of friendship in his ‘Of Friendship’; and Nietzsche is overtly aware of this problem in passages such as Daybreak §287.
32 Works of Love, p.33.
33 Aristotle’s principle account of friendship appears in his Nicomachean Ethics. It would be difficult to over-state the influence of Aristotle’s account of friendship on subsequent thinkers— indeed, it is hard to break away from Aristotle’s shadow. As might be expected, there is a large literature commenting on Aristotle in relation to friendship. For a brief selection, please consult: John M. Cooper, ‘Friendship and the Good in Aristotle’, The Philosophical Review, 86 (1977); Nancy Sherman, ‘Aristotle on Friendship and the Shared Life’, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 47 (1987); And, Suzanne Stern-Gillet, Aristotle’s Philosophy of Friendship, (State University of New York Press, Albany: 1995).
so we will be able to get a clearer picture of the two varieties of friendship (poetic and philosophical) that Kierkegaard treats under the banner of friendship. However, we will also see that whilst these variations of friendship appear to have distinct features from each other, from Kierkegaard’s perspective they are, in essence, the same.

Kierkegaard’s account of the emotional aspects of friendship might initially appeal to our intuitions on the topic. However whilst Kierkegaard’s criticisms appear to have some initial value, it is important to recognise the limitations to the scope of this account. It might be conceded that friendship involves an element of emotional inclination; but it might also be argued that Kierkegaard has overplayed his hand here. If we think of some of the logical possibilities that drives and inclinations might play in friendship, the picture might not be as clear-cut as Kierkegaard presents it. First, if we were to accept that some friendships are formed on the basis of drives and inclinations, it does not follow that (a) all friendships are formed in this way, (which can include those which might later display these qualities); nor does it follow that (b) those friendships which are initially formed in this way continue to be maintained by, and dependent upon, this feature (this can still be the case even if the inclination remains present).

What might be involved if we consider the line of enquiry opened by option (a) that not all friendships find their genesis in inclination? Here two people could form a friendship not through an (initial) inclination towards each other, but through a common circumstance, experience, or even a shared set of values. Here it is possible to conceive of a particular activity (such a mutual interest in a sport, a love of music, or the requirement that the individuals work together) forming the basis of the association, and possibly the friendship. Of course, it should be said that the friends must be “inclined” to each other in the sense that they are civil to each other. However, the main focus of this friendship, and indeed the source of their association, is something other than the feelings that they have for each other which might only develop later. This bases friendship not on a sentiment alone, but a shared commonality which is not dependent on the emotional life of the individuals involved.34

Equally we might pursue the possibilities of option (b): that friendships which are formed on drives and inclination need not be dependent upon emotions or maintained in this way. Indeed, this is a clear possibility that is open in Kierkegaard’s account precisely because he claims that drives and inclinations can change. Possibility (b) could be said to be the inverse of (a). Here two people might be drawn to each other through affection or emotion, and (initially) form a friendship on this basis. However, the shared thoughts, experiences and activities of that friendship might lead to a new bond of commonality. Although the initial excitement of the new affinity might very well wane, it could be replaced by a deeper and more fulfilling bond or even by a mutual ‘tie’ in an external activity, or set of beliefs. This could be enriching for both the individuals involved and even act to secure the friendship.

Despite the plausibility of the relationships described in both (a) and (b) these accounts of friendship appear to be far less intense than the relationship that

34 Clearly this is akin to the idea of friendship that Aristotle develops insofar as he asks what is the ‘good’ aimed for in friendship, and is especially true of his ‘partial’ friendships based around utility and pleasure.
Kierkegaard has in mind. His conception appears to be a much more passionate and enclosing relationship than the one that we would commonly recognise on any standard account of friendship. Indeed, the kind of friendship to which Kierkegaard refers is described variously by him as being both ‘poetic’ and capable of association with the features of ‘erotic-love’. It is the intensity of the feelings involved in this poetic friendship that enable Kierkegaard to point to its volatility. So, whilst Kierkegaard’s critique of friendship is pertinent, we might be tempted to conclude that it appears to apply only to a specific form of close and passionate relationship. It is conceivable that there could be a spectrum of relationships which might fall under the general rubric of friendship, relationships which do not include the defects that Kierkegaard identifies. Therefore, these would stand as candidates to offer the potential for a meaningful sociality, and an authentic response to others.

However, Kierkegaard has one more line of attack which he employs in conjunction with his previous two: that friendship is essentially selfish. Using this notion Kierkegaard’s account not only bolsters the criticisms that he has made thus far, but actually shows how his account of friendship embraces all possible candidates for a model or basis for sociality and response to others. It is not simply an account of a high or intense form of friendship, it is a decisive account of friendship. If it falls, all forms of friendship fall with it. However, before we can turn to this final feature of friendship in Kierkegaard’s account we need to say a word or two about Kierkegaard’s parallel claim that friendship contains no “moral task”. This extends Kierkegaard’s account of friendship beyond the poetical forms of friendship explicitly referred to thus far, and allows Kierkegaard’s critique to be applied to the kinds of “philosophical” friendships that are described and analysed in the Classical tradition. These friendships are of importance as being based upon virtue or the love of the Good they offer the possibility of a basis for a social bond through either the love of virtue, or a form of love extended from the specific relationship to a face-to-face, or perhaps even a more abstract humanity.35

We will recall that Kierkegaard’s position concerning the lack of ‘moral task’ in friendship was that it cannot be the ethical obligation of an individual to seek their friend as friendship is based upon preference directed by passionate inclination. The ‘ethical task’ of friendship is reminiscent of Aristotle, and is used by Judge William to bolster his account of friendship in Either/Or.36 Indeed, Judge William’s position is

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36 Either/Or II: p.322. Whilst Kierkegaard was undoubtedly aware of Aristotle’s account, and we might expect any substantial deliberation on the theme of friendship to at least make reference to Aristotle’s account due to its undoubted influence in this area of thought, there are certain features of Kierkegaard’s account which militate against this direct engagement. The most significant of these is that Kierkegaard’s account is often directed at ‘poetic love’ which (as we have seen) is both preferential and passionate. The relationship of friendship as Aristotle describes it does not appear to fall under this rubric. Indeed, for Aristotle virtue-friendship is around contemplation and not passion. Kierkegaard does not deal in depth with Aristotle’s account of friendship, but not because he fails to appreciate it as an account of friendship. On the contrary, it is precisely because it is an account of friendship, rather than simply friendly relations, that enables Kierkegaard to ‘deal’ with Aristotle’s (and others’) accounts of a more philosophical friendship under the same banner as he deals with poetic friendship. Both of these accounts have the same root: that the relationships are constructed in human rather than spiritual terms. It is this root which Kierkegaard attacks.
explicitly opposed to that of Kierkegaard in *Works* as the judge views friendship as not only a moral corrective between good persons, but that:

The person who views friendship ethically sees it, then, as a duty. Therefore, I could say that it is every person’s duty to have a friend.37

However, if Kierkegaard’s position is tenable, then (contra both Aristotle and Judge William), it cannot be the ethical obligation of an individual to seek a friend, as friendship is based upon a preference directed by passionate inclination. As is well-known, Aristotle’s account of friendship divides the relationship into three distinct categories, each characterised by the good to which they aim. The lower two forms of friendship aims for usefulness and pleasure.38 The highest form of friendship (and the model for which the other two emulate) is that of virtue-friendship.39 Here the friends aim at discovering, contemplating and cultivating the Good: They love each other as lovers of the Good. In this way the friendship becomes much more than an exercise in goodwill,40 or an association with a particular (limited) end such as usefulness or pleasure.41 Virtue-friendship achieves stability because it is focused upon the mutual love of the Good itself. This is one of the reasons why Aristotle claims that bad men cannot be friends: they fail to understand or apprehend the Good, their ‘associations’ are therefore inherently unstable, and they could not form friendships with good men.42 However, for Aristotle (as for Plato), friendship is an ethical task insofar as not only is it the site of ethical activity both in term of demonstrating virtue and contemplating the Good, it is also a requirement of the good life itself. The ethical life was incomplete unless it included the virtue and relationship of friendship.43

How might Kierkegaard respond to this model which stands in contrast to his own? Specifically, how might Kierkegaard respond to the claim that there is an ethical dimension to friendship? There are two major differences between the structure of the accounts of friendship offered by Kierkegaard and Aristotle. These differences relate to the wider structure of their thought. However, the differences not only provide points of contrast between their accounts, they also render their accounts irreconcilable. The first difference relates to what we might term *telos*. The second

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37 *Either/Or* II: p.322.
38 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, pp.210-212
43 The focus of friendship as a site of ethical activity and the love of the Good is echoed and endorsed throughout the Classical literature. For example in his *De Amicitia* Cicero has Laelius claim that friendship results not from any “inadequacy” found in the individual, but from a love of virtue (Cicero 1991: 90); Seneca claims that friendships are formed so as our ‘noble qualities may not lie dormant’ (1917: 120); and finally in ‘How One May Distinguish between Flatterer and Friend’, Plutarch counsels that we should:

Realise and remember always that our soul has two sides: on the one side are truthfulness, love for what is honourable, and power to reason, and on the other side irrationality, love of falsehood, and the emotional element; the friend is always found on the better side as counsel and advocate, trying, after the manner of a physician, to foster the growth of what is sound to preserve it. (1997: 111)
(which we will discuss in fully under ‘selfishness’ the third feature of Kierkegaard’s account of friendship) is the notion of the self and selfhood itself.

What might be meant by invoking the notion of telos? The term points to what we might call the end cause of an action, event, phenomenon or entity. In Aristotle’s philosophy and account of social life, human beings seek eudemonia or the fulfilment of the Good Life. As we have also noted, the telos of the highest form of friendship (virtue-friendship) is the Good itself. That is to say, friendship forms a part of the general good life, and it also contemplates the Good as a part of the Good life. It is true that the friends receive lower goods from the relationship (such as material benefits, assistance and pleasure) but what unites the friends is the mutual apprehension, appreciation and love of the Good in, and through, each other. For Kierkegaard this attempt at founding a sociality on a human ethics is fundamentally misguided. In Kierkegaard’s account the only possible telos of human life is not ‘the Good’ but God. That is to say, the primary relationship that must be formed is that of the individual’s God-relationship. It is this relationship, which is existential and based on a variety of command-ethic, which motivates and guides the individual’s life. This is true for all individuals, and the requirements (although based on a personal response to God) are the same for all individuals. The ethical life cannot be achieved through human action or contemplation alone. The desire to do so reflects a misplaced understanding of the ethical, and an attitude of ‘despair’ (a misrelation of the self).

Therefore, what we see if we place Aristotle’s and Kierkegaard’s accounts of friendship side-by-side are two accounts that are fundamentally opposed starting and end-points. Aristotle bases his ethical account of friendship on the notion that human beings can appreciate the Good through reason, and that human flourishing can follow from this appreciation. Kierkegaard bases his account (and criticisms) of friendship on the importance of the individual’s relationship to God, and the need to overcome and transcend the purely human. In Aristotle’s account friendship presupposes and leads to the Good and eudemonia; in Kierkegaard’s account friendship is an earthly and potentially misguided snare that drives the individual away from their true human telos of becoming a self before God, and further into the misrelation of the self which is despair. It is clear then that these two accounts do not, and cannot, speak to each other as they fail to recognise the starting-points of the other’s account to be legitimate.

Thus we are brought to the recognition that what truly separates Aristotle’s and Kierkegaard’s accounts of friendship (and thus the non-Christian and Christian accounts of friendship) is not the logic or dynamics of friendship as such, but their underlying accounts of the self. Kierkegaard cannot accept Aristotle’s ethical notion and understanding of the self. As Kierkegaard writes in a Journal entry:

> Aristotle has not understood the self deeply enough, for only in the aesthetic sense does contemplative thought have an entelechy, and the felicity of the gods does not reside in contemplation but in eternal communication.— Aristotle has not perceived the specification of spirit.\(^{44}\)

\(^{44}\) *Works of Love*, p.397.
It is this distinction between contemplating the self as a temporal being, and that of apprehending the self as a spiritual being, which helps us to understand the third and final set of claims that Kierkegaard makes concerning friendship: that it is ‘selfish’. It is to this claim that we will now turn.

**Reciprocity and Selfishness**

Thus far we have explored Kierkegaard’s claims that friendship is both ‘partial’ and based upon ‘drives and inclinations’. However, to fully appreciate Kierkegaard’s criticisms of friendship it is important to understand how it is possible for Kierkegaard to claim that friendship is selfish. It is note-worthy that despite his criticisms of friendship, Kierkegaard does not reject friendship completely. He merely rejects it as a despairing existence if it is not underpinned by spiritual selfhood. It can form a component of a Christian existence if the individual underpins and transforms the relationship by recognising others as spiritual equals or neighbours. To see why this is the case (and to consider the nuances in Kierkegaard’s position) let us turn first to how it is possible for Kierkegaard to claim that friendship is selfish.

Unlike Kierkegaard’s previous claims concerning the features of friendship, to claim that friendship is selfish appears to militate against our intuitions. It would not be at all controversial to claim that our common understanding of friendship conjures up an imagine of a relationship of mutual concern for others, sharing, support and even (in possibly the most ‘ideal’ type) selflessness or self-sacrifice. Indeed, in friendship it could be supposed that the focus was on the other person rather than on ourselves. The only modification we might wish to make to such a statement is that the reciprocal qualities of friendships might invite us to claim that the friendship is mutually other-orientated. Therefore, it is perhaps even more surprising to us when we read that this is also a picture of genuine friendship that Kierkegaard recognises as being common, and even accepts as an account of friendship. Despite this, Kierkegaard still maintains that the relationship is selfish.

Kierkegaard’s claim that friendship is selfish challenges our assumptions concerning the place of the self in friendship in three ways. The first of these is to claim that the preferential and emotional aspects of friendship make the relationship ‘selfish’ insofar as they are focused upon the ‘self’ of the other person. This would be a clever but somewhat disappointing move if Kierkegaard took this no further and left his criticism in the realm of semantics; He does not. As we shall see, this semantic ‘clarification’ has more to it than meets the eye. In fact, it is employed as the taskmaster for a good deal of philosophical labour. Having pointed out the focus of friendship, Kierkegaard’s second move is to argue that the concentration on the self is coupled with the importance that the friends place on reciprocation. Here the concern with the reciprocation of the fidelity of the relationship is not a test of the other’s love (although it might take this form and it might appear to be this). It is actually a concern with the friend’s own self. To be concerned with reciprocation and especially the reciprocation of fidelity and love is for the questioner to pose the question not of *do I love the other?*, but instead to replace this question with the question of *does the*...

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45 Works of Love, pp.53-60, 266-67.
**other really love me?** The third and most significant claim of Kierkegaard’s in relation to the selfish nature of friendship is that the friendship focuses on the human self and does so in purely temporal terms. This brings us back to Kierkegaard’s understanding of the spiritual self and despair. Purely temporal friendship is actually a misrelation as the individual fails to relate primarily to God. As such it fails to provide the grounds for genuine selfhood. As a relationship of despair, friendship is doomed to failure and actually represents a triple-misrelation: to God, to ourselves, and to the other.

Kierkegaard’s initial move, then, is to draw our attention to the focus of friendship through the semantic device of claiming that friendship is selfish as it focuses on the ‘self’. In itself this observation appears to be somewhat obvious, and perhaps even trivial. However, in making this observation explicit, Kierkegaard actually forces his readers to face-up to and look afresh at what is implicit in friendship. In doing so he not merely exposes this feature, but also forces his reader into a confrontation with this feature, and the realisation that they face a fundamental choice. In this way Kierkegaard’s semantic device achieves much more than a simple change in the structure of description. It also forces a change in the structure of the world-view of the reader.46

Having refocused our attention on the object of friendship (the self) it is now possible for us to pursue Kierkegaard’s criticisms. We have seen that the selfish element of friendship is that it is not an expression of love for the other, but for a particular self (or aspects thereof). However, Kierkegaard’s criticisms extend beyond this observation to focus on one of the other features of friendship, that it is reciprocal or has a reciprocal element.47 This attack would appear somewhat peculiar (and perhaps even misguided) if we do not bear in mind that Kierkegaard’s attack on the reciprocity of friendship is not an attack on reciprocity per se. Rather, it is that the reciprocal aspect of friendship reveals the true misguided nature of the love involved in friendship. It is worth considering how Kierkegaard describes the relation in *Works*. Here Kierkegaard claims that:

> To admire another person is certainly not self-love, but to be the one and only friend of this one and only admired person—would not this relation turn back in an alarming way into the I from which we proceeded?48

Kierkegaard’s claim is that it is perfectly possible to admire the qualities of another person, but that in friendship there is a degree of exclusivity and intensity that takes the friends beyond simple admiration and into the desire to claim or possess the other. The fidelity of the friendship, which is manifested in a partial love and admiration, must be reciprocated if the friendship is to survive. Indeed, the very notion of friendship entails a reciprocal relationship: the basic unit of friendship is the pair.

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46 This device is powerful for (if the reader accepts Kierkegaard’s argument) then it is simply impossible to ‘return’ to the world and friendship as if nothing had happened. To return to friendship after understanding Kierkegaard’s account is to live in a category of conscious despair. Indeed, it is to choose despair as the individual realises that friendship is a despairing relationship, but chooses the relationship.


48 *Works of Love*, p.54-55.
Here Kierkegaard is able to link the preferential and emotional elements of friendship to the most thoroughgoing notion of selfishness. As the friendship is a reciprocal focusing on the self, Kierkegaard is able to stress that the partiality and passion of friendship lead to both exclusivity and the jealousy which he claims is ‘always fundamentally present in erotic love and friendship’. Indeed, friendship leads the friends away from a sociality with others, as the friends isolate themselves from the world. As Kierkegaard claims: ‘The more securely one I and another I join to become one I, the more this untied I selfishly cuts itself off from everyone else’. Whilst under the illusion that they share a self, the friends actually focus on their own self. Far from encouraging or laying the foundations for a wider sociality, the reciprocity in friendship actually prevents a selfless or other-orientated approach as the friendship becomes a calculation and exchange of benefits and/or an exchange of assurances and admiration. Friendship can only exist where there is reciprocity, or the hope and expectation thereof. This last claim of Kierkegaard’s is extremely hard to avoid, as it is difficult to see how reciprocity could not be a feature of friendship. This is betrayed in both ordinary and philosophical talk of friendship, where we speak of the friends supporting and caring for each other, and even the friends’ choosing of each other. The reciprocal feature of friendship is also essential if we are to distinguish it from other relationships and attitudes such as civility, goodwill or well-wishing.

Having focused our attention on the reciprocal dimension of friendship, it is now possible to see how Kierkegaard’s account of friendship extends beyond what at first appear to be the fairly narrow confines of an especially intimate and intense relationship. It is true that Kierkegaard’s main focus is on what we might term the “highest” form of friendship, but it is important that Kierkegaard can discount this form of friendship as it is the most promising form of authentic response to the other. Whilst other social relationships have merits, it is only in friendship that they combine to create the potential for a fulfilling and ethical human sociality. In this way, far from attacking a remote, rare, and perhaps even irrelevant model of sociality, Kierkegaard is playing his hand against “paganism’s” best player in the surroundings of their choosing. What Kierkegaard achieves through his examination of the reciprocal dimension of friendship is the exposure that even this most ideal of relationships is laced with selfishness, exclusivity and jealousy. Moreover, Kierkegaard has attempted to show that not only is this often the case, or even potentially the case, but that this is necessarily so because of the nature of the relationship itself. Reciprocity is one of friendship’s defining features and one of its most celebrated merits: Kierkegaard’s analysis attempts to expose it as also being one of friendship’s deepest flaws.

49 Works of Love, p.52.
50 Works of Love, pp.54/55.
51 Works of Love, p.56.
52 Works of Love, p.266-69. Montaigne’s essay is perhaps one of the best expressions of this “sharing” of a self in friendship.
55 Works of Love, p.351.
Response and Responsibility

It is now possible to draw together the strands of Kierkegaard’s analysis of friendship, and to reconsider his reasons for rejecting it as a response to the other, and a ground for an extensive and stable sociality. Kierkegaard’s account is one which draws-out three key features of friendship. Indeed, these features would appear to be intrinsic to the relationship both in the history of the idea, and also recognisable by those who are engaged in friendships. As we have seen, Kierkegaard identifies preference and partiality, drives and inclinations, and reciprocity and a focus on the self as being characteristic of friendship. This account of friendship is no ‘straw man’ as the features that Kierkegaard identifies and explores are also the features which are celebrated and contemplated by the poets and philosophers of friendship. However, whilst others have found these features ethically praiseworthy, Kierkegaard develops them in such as way as to show that they are either not subject to ethical evaluation, or even (in some cases) unethical. Kierkegaard does this not only from the perspective of his own conception of ‘neighbourliness’, but also from within the terms of an ethical understanding of friendship itself. Thus, the preferential and affective aspects in friendship are found, by Kierkegaard, to be outside the realms of the ethical, and even counterproductive to the ethical status of friendship. Similarly, Kierkegaard finds the elements of reciprocity and focus on the self troubling. Whilst reciprocity would appear to be open to conscious ethical direction, the dependency of friendship upon this feature betrays a demand on the other. The line is blurred between a genuine care for the other, and the need and condition that this concern is reflected or returned to the self from which it is issued. At best, the other becomes a willing, but conditional, participant in our own conception of well-being and self-worth; at worst, the other is reduced to the instrument of our own self-concern, and the unrecognised and devalued victim of our selfishness.

Kierkegaard’s advocated form of sociality is that of the neighbour. This relationship is built on a normative conception of a spiritual selfhood in relation to God. The relationship of the neighbour presupposes and acts on the most radical form of spiritual equality. Additionally, there can be no confusion as to who the neighbour is— the neighbour is unconditionally everyone. There can be no question of either preference, inclination, or reciprocity in the neighbour relation as not only are all spiritual equals, but the command to love the neighbour remains in force regardless of any anticipated or actual response from the neighbour. Thus, from this perspective, it can be said that friendship is a despairing relationship in three main senses. First, friendship in both its philosophical and poetic forms fails to recognise the centrality of spirit in the formation of self. It is true that friendship can recognise the spiritual aspects of persons, but it fails to build upon the full implications of this. Indeed, it cannot recognise spirituality qua friendship. In Kierkegaard’s account friendship ignores or displaces the God-relationship and focuses on the purely human aspects of self, or transforms spirit into a human category. Second, this misconception concerning spirit not only fails to place God at the centre of the relationality, but deifies the human. The loyalty, fidelity and love shown towards the friend is not only a secret reflection of selfishness, but is also an impossible foundation for human sociality. As Kierkegaard has claimed, friendship is made into the highest good, or finds its place in a plurality of equal goods. This results in either the worldly ethical

56 Works of Love, p.21.
being placed as the highest good, or the human self becoming deified. From Kierkegaard’s point of view this is a manifestation of despair (or a misrealition of the self).

Thus, in the final analysis, Kierkegaard presents us with two contrasting accounts of our response to the other. It is possible to argue that from Kierkegaard’s perspective friendship is a dangerous self-deception that, in responding to the other, also deceives the friends about their true responsibilities. It is possible to characterise Kierkegaard’s account of friendship as one which espouses a self-deception as for Kierkegaard there is a double-movement in the relationship. Whilst (overtly) friendship appears to be other-orientated, and thus not primarily about the self, in fact (argues Kierkegaard), the reciprocity needed for the maintenance of the relationship points us straight back to a concern with the self. However, the second movement shows that we are deceived about our ‘selves’. That is to say, the self which we (secretly) seek to maintain and foster in friendship is a limited, temporal self. The enclosing dynamics of friendship elevate this self and far from creating a forum for truly self-less and other-orientated activity, friendship reinforces and entrenches the limited temporal self which is mired in despair. In addition, whilst friendship is certainly one response to the other, it is far from a relationship in which responsibility for the other is exercised. Again, there are two movements to this. The first is that the friend is not taking responsibility for the other without conditions. Moreover, the friend is not truly concerned with the ‘self’ of the other, but with their own self. The second movement is that even though the ‘responsibility’ to the other betrays the selfish concern of the friend, ultimately they are not even acting responsibly towards their own self. They base their conception of their self on temporal dependencies, and do not turn to consider or to engage with their true responsibility towards the spiritual foundations of the self. In Kierkegaard’s view, before an individual can act responsibly (that it religiously-ethically) towards others they have to do so in relation to their own self. Until an individual has performed the one essential task (establishing a relationship as spirit with God, and thus becoming a self), no responsibility can be taken for others. The individual might act in an ‘ethical’ way, but does not really connect with this ethical behaviour as it is not founded in a self. Indeed, the individual is subject to the moulding and influence of others, and cannot take responsibility for their own self.

In conclusion, whilst we might not care-for nor feel able to endorse Kierkegaard’s demanding religious conception of a spiritual self, it remains the case that his criticisms of friendship are powerful and troubling. The problems that Kierkegaard outlines are problems which would have to be traversed by anyone proposing an account of friendship— especially if it was claimed that the account lays the framework for a genuine response towards the other, and is a truly ethical manifestation of responsibility. What is also important in Kierkegaard’s account of friendship is that whilst he comes to reject the relationship as a basis for sociality, he does identity what seems to be important about friendship, and what makes it such a strong candidate for such a sociality: reciprocity and a concern for the self. Thus, in his treatment of friendship (albeit a critical one) Kierkegaard raises again what may be considered a key question of the political: what is the ontological status of the self and other. Insofar as Kierkegaard investigates the possibilities for an ethical response to the other, and the possibilities of responsibility towards self and others in relation, Kierkegaard returns friendship to the discourse of politics and modernity.