

Sharon Krishek, *Lovers in Essence: A Kierkegaardian Defense of Romantic Love* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

Reviewed by Chase Moloney, Yale University

Sharon Krishek's *Lovers in Essence* articulates a compelling theory of romantic love that draws on Kierkegaard's thought. Though deeply indebted to Kierkegaard, Krishek is not afraid to disagree fruitfully when appropriate. Despite covering some of Kierkegaard's toughest ground and simultaneously trying to provide an account of what love is and how it shapes our lives, the arguments in *Lovers in Essence* are presented clearly and in such a way that a reader with little training in Kierkegaard or philosophy could still easily follow her lines of reasoning.

The basic thesis of *Lovers in Essence* is that each person has a divine name bestowed by God, meaning that each person has a unique potential essence that can be actualized in various ways and to greater or lesser degrees. Krishek argues that it is each person's task to actualize this self and that loving others and being loved in return is an important part of the way we do this. She argues that despite its inherent exclusionary aspects, romantic love for another self is no less suited to this task than familial or neighborly love.

Krishek's argument offers a solution to two different problems. First: Why do we love the people we do romantically? To summarize traits (she is smart, he has brown eyes, she works hard, he is kind, etc.) strikes us as reductive, as if our romantic interest could be summed up in an equation. Furthermore, even if another met this list we drew up, it doesn't seem like it can be guaranteed that romantic love would necessarily show up. On the other hand, if we see love as having *no* reason, then love feels arbitrary and entirely contingent, which also feels contrary to our experience of love as connected to our beloved in particular. Krishek's solution to this problem is to argue that we are attracted to our romantic lover's essence, which is more than just the sum of particulars that have been actualized, even if this essence is ultimately the source of those particular aspects that we appreciate in our beloved. Krishek's approach avoids attempting to explain our love for someone as just a summary of traits or even of shared history while also avoiding the risk of saying there is no reason why we love our beloved and not some other person. Krishek also offers, against both the account of love as a consumeristic preference and as an arbitrary pairing, a picture of growing with one's partner.

Second: How do we defend the impulse that romantic love is equally valuable compared to neighborly or familial love? Krishek argues that despite engaging some of the most “self-interested” aspects of ourselves, romantic love should not be dismissed, and in fact, the engaging of these self-focused aspects *toward* the other for mutual growth is just as consequential. Her defense is that romantic love, despite being susceptible to selfishness due to the strong desires involved, is nevertheless ultimately good and just as capable of meeting her definition of love as “joyful, compassionate caring” (96). Furthermore, Krishek argues that there is a spiritual component of romantic love, whereby lovers help “each other to become the selves they are intended, by God, to be” (201). While acknowledging that romantic love gone wrong can be destructive, her theory also accounts for the ways that romantic love can destroy illusions that ought to be destroyed. Lovers are not content; they want to know more about their beloved, and they are not satisfied with half-truths. The same lies and acts we put on for the world do not work when someone wants to know us more and more and wants us to want *them*. This means that when things break down, it hurts all the more. But it also means that when they see who we are, and love us not just in spite of that but *because* of who we really are, they model for us how to better love ourselves.

Readers will benefit most from the way Krishek is not constrained by the twentieth-century existentialist readings of Kierkegaard. This is a welcome development that allows us to consider how Kierkegaard's ideas might be compatible with an understanding of essences. While I remain skeptical about how identifiable an essence is, I don't think a Kierkegaardian framework precludes them, and I am curious to see whether Krishek's book might spark some further work on the value of holding to essences in spite of these challenges.

I think Krishek succeeds outright in defending romantic love as valid for the Kierkegaardian. This is an interesting outcome, especially given Kierkegaard's own rejection of lived out romantic love with Regine and of marriage. As a young undergraduate my first introduction to Kierkegaard was through *Sickness unto Death* and *Fear and Trembling*, taught alongside Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Many of the ideas found in both authors, particularly the inherent despair of the contrary aspects that constitute what it means to be a self, have remained with me since. It has remained my view since that the main difference in the pictures of selfhood found in Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky is that Dostoevsky sees a greater role for loving and being loved by others in the process of healing from despair. Such views may allow for a healthier view of our relationship to our own finitude and selfish desires, in the sense that they are redeemed and placed in service of

those we love. Krishek makes an excellent defense of how such an elevated view of love for others as part of our healing is not just healthier, but actually more compatible with Kierkegaard's own views of selfhood, despair, and healing expressed in *The Sickness unto Death*.

My primary skepticism of Krishek's account of essence is that it is not obvious how we might discern our own individual essence, much less anyone else's. I am not opposed to the idea that we might have some elements of our personality that result from a potential in our essence being actualized in different ways. In my own life, much of my desire to become a Kierkegaard scholar stems from the urge to take what meaning, provocation, and vitality to live I gained from my encounter with Kierkegaard's works and share them with others hungry for purpose or feeling the pains of doubt and grief. So while I am doing something not very common (trying to become an expert in a Danish philosopher who wrote nearly two centuries ago), my desire is motivated by the universal desire to help others (amid the less noble motivations that surely exist in me too, like the desire for attention or for people to think I'm clever).

But even the way these desires show up might be contingent. Few would argue that my essence is specifically to become a Kierkegaard scholar, but it is not clear at what level an essence would make contact with specific paths or actions. Is my essence to become just some form of scholar? That does not seem quite right, as there are many meaningful paths I could take which do not involve scholarship. One might think that the issue with this example is vocation, but this seems to hold even for more central qualities like wit, leadership, or creativity. There might still be some way to whittle closer towards an essence; arguably, vices can be ruled out as non-essential (at least, taking a standard theological reading), and virtues can also be ruled out as not part of one's individual essence but as part of our essence as people or rational agents. But beyond this, it seems difficult to properly identify what is essential in someone. If we have little knowledge of them, then much of our experience could be quite similar regardless of whether we believe Krishek or the essence-skeptical Kierkegaard scholars that she contrasts herself with.

Nonetheless, there might be good reasons to believe in individual essence even if we cannot always identify them. As Krishek demonstrates in Chapter 2, the idea that love is a meeting of essences has explanatory power even when one struggles to fully define a particular person's essence. In addition to answering the question of why we love our beloved without resorting to a list of attributes or declining to offer any reason at all, Krishek's theory also explains why we *want* our beloved to love us for us. We are not satisfied by them loving particular traits or combinations of traits; one alteration of

preference or the arrival of someone a little bit better who meets all those combinations might mean we lose our place. On the other hand, if they say they just love us, that there is no reason, it feels arbitrary, as if they could have loved anyone else had circumstances been otherwise. We want to hear our beloved say, "I love you because you're you," and when we grow in intimacy, we desire our love to know who we *are*. This experience is perhaps the best defense of why we ought to adopt this theory, even if the practice of identifying an essence definitively is murky at best. Krishek's theory offers a way to explain this phenomenon of wanting to be known for who we are in the truest sense, and, in spite of all the ways it can blow up, fall apart or wither away, trust that this kind love is ultimately real and not wishful self-deception.

I recommend *Lovers in Essence* both to those who want to see how Kierkegaard's account of selfhood can be taken up constructively, and to anyone looking for a philosophically compelling account of love. It is a clearly written book covering challenging territory that achieves much of what it sets out to and is true to its Kierkegaardian spirit.