

Other-Worldliness in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*

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From early on, certain religions have been criticized for promoting an orientation of other-worldliness which implies and supports neglect of (or even contempt for) this-worldly needs. Marx voiced the modern criticism of 'the other-world': 'The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly a struggle against *that world* whose spiritual *aroma* is religion.'¹ Thirty years later another angry critic of religion, Nietzsche, deplored the 'concept of the "beyond," the "true world" invented in order to devaluate the only world there is – in order to retain no goal, no reason, no task for our earthly reality!'² and insisted that 'If one shifts the centre of gravity of life *out* into the "Beyond" . . . one has deprived life as such of its centre of gravity.'³ Søren Kierkegaard's various accounts of religiousness, with their emphases on inwardness and subjectivity, have seemed to some a paradigm example of such an irresponsible deflection of attention from, and devaluation of, this world. Two early twentieth-century interpretations of Kierkegaard's thought focused decisive attention on this criticism and significantly contoured the subsequent reception of his thought. Martin Buber, in 1936, offered perhaps the most well-known criticism of Kierkegaard's understanding of the relation to God as other-worldly or 'acosmic.'⁴ Addressing Kierkegaard's preoccupation with the 'individual' or 'single one' (culminating his *Point of View*), Buber's version of the charge of acosmic other-worldliness emphasized an either/or between God and creation: for Kierkegaard, the exclusivity of the relation to God (the chosen one)

1. Karl Marx, Introduction to *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1844), in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), p. 54.

2. *Ecce Homo*, 'Why I Am A Destiny,' §8 (trans. Walter Kaufmann, Vintage, 1989, p. 334).

3. *The Anti-Christ* (1895), §43 (trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Penguin, 1968, p. 155); he also insists there that 'With the "Beyond" one kills life' (§58).

4. Martin Buber, 'The Question to the Single One' (1936), p. 52, in *Between Man and Man* (New York: Macmillan, c. 1965).

seemed to render others (the rejected creation) inessential. In 1939 T. W. Adorno brought Kierkegaard's non-pseudonymous *Works of Love* to public attention (before it was available in English translation) precisely as an example of a religious ethic which devalues this world.⁵ Adorno's version of the charge is that the inwardness of love implies an indifference to temporal circumstances, and this is dangerous insofar as it can be used to justify indifference to distress, poverty, oppression, etc. Indicting Kierkegaard for a 'callous,' 'flip-pant,' and unbiblical commitment to abstraction, which threatens to become 'the darkest hatred of man,' Adorno then turns to the 'demonic consequence' of his 'insistence on inwardness,' namely, that it 'actually leaves the world to the devil.'⁶ 'What,' he asks, 'can loving one's neighbor mean, if one can neither help him nor interfere with a setting of the world which makes such help impossible?' The result of such indifference, according to Adorno, is a 'spiteful' and 'stubborn maintenance of the "givenness" of the social order [which] is socially conformist and ready to lend its arm to oppression and misanthropy.'⁷ I want, in what follows, to focus on *Works of Love* and assess this charge of other-worldliness (or devaluation of this world).

Grist for the mill of the charge of otherworldliness can be found throughout *Works of Love*.⁸ Adorno calls particular attention to some chapters in the second series: namely, the chapter on impotent mercifulness (VII), which, he says, reveals the 'flippancy of a rigor-ousness which is ready to leave everything in its status quo,' and the

5. T. W. Adorno, 'On Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love,' *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* VIII (1939), pp. 413–29. Adorno also charges *Works of Love* with abstraction, but (although they are related) in some respects the charge of acosmism seems to be conceptually distinguishable from the charge of abstraction and I want to focus directly on it here. See my 'Moral Blindness and Moral Vision in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*' (*Journal of Religious Ethics*, Spring 1997) for a detailed discussion of abstraction and concreteness in this ethic.

6. Adorno, pp. 416, 417, 420, 423. Adorno suggests that Kierkegaard's two emphases contradict each other: 'he always insists on the "practice of real life." [but] His failure to reach this practice by his concepts, and the unyielding abstractness of his doctrine, are symptoms that it is not quite as substantial as it pretends to be' (418–19). This charge is also made by Bruce M. Hucker in 'Who is My Neighbor?' *A Study in the Ethics of Love and Preference* (Princeton Theology Seminary Ph.D., 1975 (University Microfilms International, 1979), p. 152). Insofar as acosmism may be seen as a specific version of abstractness, the charge that Kierkegaard contradicts himself applies to the problem of acosmism.

7. Adorno, p. 421.

8. *Works of Love*, eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

chapter on love of the dead (IX), whose demand ‘that love behave toward all men as if they were dead’ can, he says, ‘most accurately summarize Kierkegaard’s doctrine of love.’⁹ The requirement of indifference of the sort relevant to charges of other-worldliness is, however, actually introduced in the first series, in the third chapter (IIC) of the deliberation on the love commandment. There we find recommendations of blindness to temporal distinctions, and statements of the inevitability of temporal distinctions and Christianity’s indifference to the ‘goal of one temporal condition’; these are the first instances of what fuel the charge that *Works of Love* dictates a conservative preservation of the *status quo* and callous indifference to unjust social conditions. I want to explore two of these specific contexts in *Works of Love* in which indifference is recommended: first, I: IIC, because I think the way the indifference is introduced can shed light on the way it is to be understood throughout the work, and then II: VII because it is arguably the most problematical chapter with respect to other-worldliness. I want to argue that in both contexts the recommendation of indifference to temporal circumstances is part of the strategy for demonstrating the requirement of *equality in the obligation* to love and follows directly from it, and that it need not, and is not intended to, support an overall attitude of indifference to physical or worldly need.

1. ‘YOU shall love’ – I: IIC

One way to begin this inquiry is to consider why there is a third chapter in the deliberation on the love commandment at all? Why isn’t the commandment sufficiently clarified once the elements of ‘shall’ and ‘neighbor’ have been clarified? Why is there an additional discussion highlighting the ‘you’? What is emphasized in the discussion of the ‘you’ that is not emphasized in the discussion of the ‘neighbor’? If we consider the titles of the chapters, the most simple and obvious contrast between the two seems to be that the discussion of ‘neighbor’ focuses on the object of love, while the discussion of ‘you’ focuses on the subject of the obligation to love. I suggest that this contrast is carried through and is actually a very significant one for assessing the implications of the recommendation of indifference to temporal distinction.

9. Adorno, p. 422, pp. 416–17.

The title of IIB emphasizes 'the neighbor,' the object of love, and the discussion explores the contrast with self-love. It highlights the equality of 'others' with respect to the preference of self-love; the issue is formulated in terms of those people I prefer and avoid because they are, in general, like/unlike me. We are told that we cannot make the bargain of simply caring for the people we prefer because they are like us; we can make no exception to who shall be cared for when they are in need. In IIC the title, focusing on 'you,' suggests that the emphasis will be on the subject of the obligation rather than the object. I propose that the point of this chapter is to highlight the equality of the demand on us, to insist that we can make no exception to the 'you' who is required to act as neighbor to another. As such, the two chapters are clearly related, but they are related according to the deliberate ambiguity within the term 'neighbor' – both the one served and the one who serves could be called neighbor but they are so in different senses. This is correlated with the difference Kierkegaard himself notes: "The one to whom I have a duty is my neighbor, and when I fulfill my duty I show that I am a neighbor". (22) Insofar as the focus in IIB is on how one cannot exclude any one from the category of those who are worthy of or due our love, and the focus in IIC is on how one cannot exempt oneself from the command to love, equality in the love commandment is presented as having two loci – you and the other. The commandment is to be fulfilled by all without exception in relation to all without exception.

Whereas in IIB the dissimilarity or distinction we are to look away from is cast in terms of what is like/unlike me in general, relative to self-love's preference, the dissimilarity or distinction in IIC is cast in terms of distinguished/lowly, relative to worldly rank and circumstances. While the reference of both distinctions may coincide, the sense of each is quite different. It is the latter that usually gives rise to the suspicion of other-worldliness. The point I want to make is that the recommendation of indifference to conditions of rank, birth, circumstance (and hence their change or betterment), achieves prominence in the context of the chapter where we are led (at least by the title) to expect a focus on the subject, on the equality of the obligation. I find this intriguing; indeed, references to indifference to worldly circumstances seem an integral part of the way in which such equality can be affirmed. I suggest, therefore, that this chapter reveals a rationale for the recommended indifference which guides

and limits how the recommended indifference is to be expressed. Moreover, I suggest that what is found in this chapter is supported explicitly in later chapters.

Consider in detail the progressive account, in the first series, of indifference to earthly conditions. Christianity, Kierkegaard says in IIC, does not 'divisively take sides' on the question of temporal distinctions – 'with the calmness of eternity it surveys equably all the dissimilarities of earthly life'. (70) He writes in what seems at best a complacent vein that the 'dissimilarity of earthly life . . . must continue as long as temporality continues' because it is through overcoming temptations that we become Christian. (70) However 'well-intentioned' this may be, he insists that it is nonetheless 'worldliness' to try to achieve 'one temporal condition' for all, because 'worldly similarity . . . is not Christian equality'. (71–2) Christianity 'allows all dissimilarities to stand,' teaching that 'every-one [high and low] is to *lift himself above* earthly dissimilarity'. (72) He who loves the neighbor 'is at peace' by being content with the dissimilarity of earthly life allotted to him, be it that of distinction or lowliness'. (84) It is not necessary to 'abolish distinctions' precisely because they are mere garments which, if they 'hang loosely' enough, allow us to see 'that essential other, which is common to all, the eternal resemblance, the likeness'. (88)

Kierkegaard goes on in the following chapter (IIB) to explain that what is Christian 'is not of this world' but 'belongs to another world' (138); it 'does not want to make changes in externals . . . it wants only to make infinity's change in the inner being'. (139) Christianity's declared aim is a transformation 'by which everything indeed remains as it was,' affecting neither the 'external' nor what can be seen. (135) Such claims seem to emasculate the demand of love, rendering it cautiously ineffectual – as such, they fuel the charge of devaluing this world. Blindness to distinctions seems to imply that they are morally irrelevant and thus to carry in its train an immoral indifference to people's concrete needs. Such an 'inwardness' ('Indeed, what else is Christianity but inwardness!' [137]) seems to make normative a passive affirmation of the *status quo*, urging that we (and others) 'rise above' the temporal conditions we (and others) face rather than challenge them. What are we to make of these apparently insensitive, even harsh, judgments? Are they, as Adorno charges, callous, flippant, hateful, and unbiblical?

My main question is whether struggle to remedy inequity and injustice and oppression is ruled out or allowed by Kierkegaard's recommendations of indifference. But I am also asking whether his recommended indifference so separates inwardness from externals that it (1) fails to appreciate how externals can limit inner potential, (2) encourages a callousness on the part of those who can help, and/or (3) encourages a guilt on the part of those who need help. To one eager to find fault there is much grist for the mill here, but I suggest that it is impossible to make an accurate and fair assessment without taking special notice of a very unusual feature of *Works of Love*, and of IIC in particular.

This unusual feature, which is seldom directly noted, is attention to the ways in which the disadvantaged can be unloving. We come face to face with a rather unexpected account of the potential corruptions of the lowly, as well as of the distinguished – because Kierkegaard suggests it would be 'cowardly' if he did not 'dare to make people aware, the lowly or the distinguished'. (85) This account begins with the observation that 'one person is haughty and another defiantly envies,' but 'both ways are in fact rebellion . . . against the essentially Christian' (70) and ends with the observation that 'a person can inhumanly wish to make himself indispensable by his power, but he can also wish to make himself indispensable by his weakness . . .'. (126) In Nietzschean fashion, Kierkegaard reminds us that cowardice, hypocrisy, envy, and 'crafty defiance' can all be vices of those who are oppressed or disadvantaged. (70, 74, 80, 84) This results, admittedly, in what may look like advice to the disadvantaged from the advantaged – self-serving advice, at worst, and paternalistic, at best. But I suggest that we take Kierkegaard at his word when he explicitly urged that the reader be as careful in interpreting his distinctions and examples as he was in setting them up (73), and that we reconsider indifference to temporal circumstances in this particular context.

If we do this, we see that Kierkegaard parallels two accounts – both begin with a claim that 'the times are past' when people can be unsubtle in their failure to love. The first details the ways the 'powerful and prominent' are now tempted to be unloving (74) and the second details the kind of corruption to which the 'lowly' are tempted. (80) The point is that YOU – high or low – need to be a neighbor to others. YOU, if socially or materially privileged, cannot exempt yourself from loving those less so, so far as you can – but it is

also true that YOU, if disadvantaged in these respects, must be able to be a neighbor to others, including those who are socially or materially above you, so far as you can and so far as they need. The former is the obvious reminder to give; the second is not as obvious but it is just as necessary. Kierkegaard's recommendation of indifference covers both reminders.

My thesis is that the implied rationale for the recommended indifference is that, insofar as neighbor love is a duty, two things must be guaranteed. First, ought implies can, so the duty must be *able to be fulfilled* by all, equally. 'Eternity,' he writes, 'assumes that every person can do it and therefore only asks if he did it'. (79) This same claim, as we shall see, is made especially clear in II: VII, on the duty to be merciful. Second, there must be a distinction between striving and achievement, since the consequences of our actions are subject to things outside our control. This is made explicit within the chapter when he reminds us that 'What a person will or will not achieve is not within his power'. (84) Such a recognition does not, however, preclude responsibility to *strive* to achieve certain ends.¹⁰ I propose that both these factors entail that there be an indifference to social (socio-economic-political) conditions, but only in very specific senses: (1) indifference with respect to the condition of the one obliged to love and (2) indifference with respect to the condition actually effected by our attempts to fulfill our duty. That is, with respect to determination of one's obligation to be loving, one's physical circumstances can be ignored; moreover, meritorious fulfillment of duty cannot be conditional on one's particular temporal achievements.

What is at stake is that the duty cannot be biased; there can be no unfair advantages with respect to fulfilling the command. The irrelevance of worldly distinctions is affirmed in the attempt to make clear that the obligation is not conditional on one's particular temporal circumstances. The point is that one's temporal circumstances are irrelevant to one's obligation to love – they can neither make it easier nor harder to fulfill.

But is Kierkegaard being naive or unrealistic about this? He is right to point to love's independence from material *determination*:

10. Gene Outka's interesting discussion of *Works of Love* unfortunately focuses on the term 'performance' in a way which makes the contrast between effort and achievement more difficult to assess ('Equality and Individuality: Thoughts on Two Themes in Kierkegaard,' *Journal of Religious Ethics* 10 (1982), pp. 182 ff.); see his discussion of 'natural advantage' (Section IV).

that is, to point out that, given our lack of control over the physical causal nexus, merit attaches to striving rather than achieving. But is he naive about what affects striving, about how deeply external conditions can undermine our very energy to continue to strive? It must be admitted that he often exhibits an elitist or naive sense of what constitutes disadvantage, but occasionally he shows a remarkable sensitivity to the power of debilitating or undermining conditions, as when he urges us to imagine 'the misery of those who perhaps from childhood or from some time later in life have been so tragically devastated, so badly ravaged, that they are unable to do anything at all, perhaps are even scarcely able to express sympathy in clear words'. (325)¹¹ Whether or not he is correct in his ultimate optimism about our ability to strive even when we are demoralized and our efforts are frustrated, it seems fair to say that he is at least not naive about the difficulty.

I conclude then, that in the context of equality of demand, the recommendation of indifference to temporal circumstances serves a purpose which does not entail other-worldliness. It is perhaps unexpected to see attention paid to, demands being made on, both the 'prominent' and the 'lowly,' but it need not be a proposed justification for indifference to bettering social conditions for those in need. To suggest that the disadvantaged and oppressed must, like the advantaged and oppressors, be warned against being unloving, to suggest that envy is as much to be avoided (is as incompatible with loving) as haughtiness (70, 80): these *do not* license the inference that one is not obligated to help the needy in the ways one can.

Admittedly, Kierkegaard walks a fine line here. What is true may nonetheless be inappropriately said in certain circumstances; some things can only be understood by those prepared by experience to hear them and some reminders should only be voiced by those who have reached a certain point in their own ethical development. There is always the danger that one may take what is offered as a reminder to someone else as an excuse for oneself; reminders of the potential vices of the disadvantaged should be offered very cautiously, if at all, when the audience also includes better-off people who could use those reminders in a self-serving way against the disadvantaged. But Kierkegaard is himself fully aware, and reminds the reader, that the same expression can mean something different

11. Is this perhaps a hidden autobiographical reference?

depending on who says it. At a simple level, an expression like 'the multiplicity of creation,' for example, 'means something very different, depending on who the speaker is'. (282) More to the point, words which seem to mitigate the rigorousness of the command to love can be misunderstood. We need to attend to the experience of the speaker, to whether the words 'are the beginning of the discourse about love' or its 'completion,' because 'that which is truth on the lips of the veteran and perfected apostle could in the mouth of a beginner very easily be a philandering by which he would leave the school of the commandment much too soon and escape the "school-yoke"'. (376)

It is against this background of Kierkegaard's rhetorical sensitivity to audience that advice to the 'lowly,' 'disregarded servant,' the 'indigent, poor charwoman who earns her living by menial work' should be understood. (136) He reminds her that Christianity says 'Do not busy yourself with changing the shape of the world or your situation, as if you . . . instead of being a poor charwoman, perhaps could manage to be called "Madame",' but he also notes that it speaks 'in confidence to every human being.' This recommendation of indifference is addressed to her in her particular circumstances, and, as such, it is a warning against the envious thought that advance in social standing will help her to be a better Christian, more loving – as if the two were necessarily connected. It is offered 'in confidence' to her; it is not a reminder offered to her stingy employer (to mitigate his responsibility), nor is it advice her stingy employer can appropriately offer to her. The recommendation of indifference to temporal circumstances is not appropriately offered by the slum landlord to his tenants – indeed, the inappropriateness of a given recommendation of indifference is revealed by 'the bitterness of the mockery, by the aridity of the sensibleness, by the poisonous spirit or distrust, [or] by the biting cold of callousness' (7) that motivates it. So too the recommendation of indifference is not meant to be taken by the slum landlord as an excuse for maintaining substandard housing conditions.

Another factor may be relevant to putting Kierkegaard's conclusions in perspective. One of his assumptions is that the Danes are a 'fortunately endowed people'. (457) Whether this assumption is elitist, naive, or realistic, it does help to explain his emphases. I think it is telling that the discussion of indifference to distinction or dissimilarity is explicitly addressed to an audience of those tempted to be

haughty or tempted to envy. (70, 74, 80) His repeated references to 'silk and ermine' and 'high rank' and 'circles' (the distinguished live 'in the alliance of their circles,' flee 'from one distinguished circle to another') (74–5), suggest a society obsessed with rankings of prestige and social standing. They suggest an *audience*, some of which is tempted to pride itself on being in the 'right' circles (the country club set, the acknowledged cultural elite), and the rest of which (like the charwoman) is tempted to be discontent because it wants to be in those or other envied circles. The audience he addresses could perhaps be characterized as one where differences are the sort we find between those who have boxes at the theater and Mercedes in their garages and those who have balcony seats and Buicks. Given such an audience, the recommendation of indifference to material distinctions does not warrant the charge of other-worldliness.

Not only is immoral other-worldliness not entailed by the kind of indifference recommended in this chapter, it does not seem to be Kierkegaard's intention for the book as a whole. Consider his warning in the first chapter – namely, that acts of charity can be unloving if one is 'thinking about his own cares instead of thinking about the cares of the poor, perhaps seeking alleviation by giving to charity instead of wanting to alleviate poverty'. (13–14) This warning is phrased in such a way that the duty of alleviating poverty seems to be assumed. (We hear an echo of this when he warns: 'Take care lest being loved is more important to you than that in which you are to love one another' (129).) His general commitments to 'action' and 'actuality' support this demand to 'alleviate poverty.' His repeated appeal to the example of the Samaritan is fully in line with this emphasis: 'Christ does not speak about knowing the neighbor but about becoming a neighbor oneself, about showing oneself to be a neighbor just as the Samaritan showed it by his mercy'. (22) Showing oneself to be a neighbor does not involve addressing only 'spiritual' needs; unless one already holds a dualist, spiritualist, point of view, one need not see the injunction to serve the neighbor in terms of such dualism.

Kierkegaard's condemnation of the escapism of abstract love is strong and consistently maintained throughout *Works of Love*, and this is in keeping with his view that 'actuality' is the source of demand and responsibility. He condemns escapism when he condemns the 'worldly way' of closing oneself off from the world, in order to avoid being contaminated by the rough, the lowly, the

undistinguished. (74) If you are not attentive to actual persons and thus fail to respond to the one who walks by you in misery, you have indeed been blind – ‘but not, alas, in the Christian sense’. (75) The non-Christian sense of closed eyes is criticized because it is that by which one closes oneself off from the world. He chastises the Pharisee’s intellectualizing about who his neighbor is, suggesting that he asked the question ‘in order to find an escape’ from the task it might reveal. (96) He warns that ‘the most dangerous of all escapes as far as love is concerned is wanting to love only the unseen or that which one has not seen’ (161); this escapism is tempting because it is ‘intoxicating’, but *Works of Love* warns us that such loving ‘flies over actuality altogether’.

In sum, Kierkegaard’s dismissals of the relevance of temporal distinctions do not support a charge of acosmic other-worldliness because they do not in themselves mitigate the obligation of those with privilege to be loving or their responsibility for alleviating the lot of others less fortunate. His recommendation to ignore distinctions does not preclude a basis for programs of socio-economic change. Moreover, his assumptions about alleviating poverty and being the Samaritan to others could be said to provide the impulse for such programs. Indeed, if he is sensitive enough to condemn the way people who are in ‘alliances of circles’ can fail in their duty to love when *they* let “‘those people” feel their paltriness’ (75), it is difficult to imagine that he could excuse those who fail to provide minimally humane living conditions. Moreover, his description of how the high can incur opposition by loving the low (74, 85) seems to assume cases in which the high are trying to better conditions for them. But Kierkegaard’s determination to be even-minded about the obligation to perform works of love does mean that his discussion will not take the form of those which focus on externals.

Kierkegaard is working with a very rich set of contrasts between inward and outward, internal and external. He reminds us of our obligation to respond with ‘compassion’ – and this is clearly different from sitting back and indulging in an ineffectual pity.¹² In this sense ‘hidden’ compassion is useless. But the emphasis on action also takes into account the inadequacy of simple outwardness, as is clear from his suggestion that ‘one who feeds the poor – but still has not yet been victorious over his mind in such a way that he calls this meal a

12. *Works of Love*, pp. 78–9; also p. 22.

banquet – sees the poor and the lowly only as the poor and the lowly. The one who gives *the banquet* sees the neighbor in the poor and the lowly . . . ’. (83) What is condemned by implication is a cold, distanced giving. A giving which sees only the poor and unimportant is not a loving giving; it cannot count as a celebration, a ‘banquet’.

2. Impotent Mercifulness – II: VII

Let us turn now to the chapter to which much attention has been called by critics, namely, ‘Mercifulness, A Work of Love Even If It Can Give Nothing and Is Able to Do Nothing’. This chapter includes such potentially self-serving advice as ‘Be merciful to us more fortunate ones! . . . you have it in your power to alarm the rest of us – so be merciful!’ It includes the troubling assessment that ‘From the point of view of eternity, that someone dies is no misfortune, but that mercifulness is not practiced certainly is,’ and it dismisses the ‘well-intentioned’ social conscience which cries that ‘the main thing is . . . that need be remedied in every way’. (326) And all of this on a single shocking page! What is the point of such a chapter?

I suggest that several presuppositions inform this discussion and crucially account for its emphases. The first is the presupposition that if mercifulness is present, generosity will follow. He says this both explicitly and repeatedly. First, if you know how to instill mercifulness, ‘then generosity will follow of itself and come by itself accordingly as the individual is capable of it’. (315) Once more, he reminds us: ‘It follows of itself that if the merciful person has something to give he gives it more than willingly’. (317) But, he continues, ‘it is not on this that we focus attention, but on this, that one can be merciful without having the least thing to give.’ Finally, as if anticipating the misunderstandings that would occur, he writes: ‘It follows naturally of itself that if the merciful person is able to do something, he is only too glad to do it. But that is not what we wanted to focus attention upon, but rather upon this, that one can be merciful without being able to do the least thing’. (324)

The second presupposition is that the message is addressed to a particular audience – namely, YOU, without the advantages which allow you to be generous. He repeats: ‘the discourse addresses itself

to you, you poor and wretched!' (322); 'the discourse addresses itself to you, you wretched ones who are able to do nothing at all'. (325) This focus on a particular kind of audience does much, I think, to explain what would otherwise be callous advice.

The message is 'Be merciful! Keep within your bosom this heart that despite poverty and misery still has sympathy for the misery of others' (322); avoid the idolization of money (321), for 'Mercifulness is infinitely unrelated to money'. (319) The point that can be extrapolated to all audiences (as it was in IIC) is that whatever your temporal circumstances, you are *bound* to fulfill your duty to be merciful; it remains your duty in any case. The point that needs to be emphasized for this particular audience is that whatever your temporal circumstances you are *able* to fulfill your duty (and so it remains your duty).

He writes, 'Oh, be merciful! Do not let the envious pettiness of this earthly existence finally corrupt you so that you could forget that you are able to be merciful'. (322) To assume it is only worthwhile to speak to the rich about mercifulness to the poor means that the poor person 'is abandoned by the world's conception of his ability to practice mercifulness and therefore is singled out, given up, as the pitiable object of mercifulness. . . . Merciful God, what mercilessness!' (322) Hence, 'Be merciful. This comfort, that you are able to be merciful . . .'. (324) His sympathy for 'the misery of those who perhaps from childhood or from some time later in life have been so tragically devastated, so badly ravaged, that they are unable to do anything at all, perhaps are even scarcely able to express sympathy in clear words' leads him to ask: 'should we now be so merciless as to add this new cruelty to all their misery, to deny them the capacity to be merciful . . .?' (325) These passages clearly suggest that the reminder of equal obligation is used, in *this* audience, to *build up*, as reassurance of equal ability.

There is, undoubtedly, a kind of extreme rhetoric in the following passages. 'Be merciful, be merciful toward the rich! Remember what you have in your power, while he has the money! Do not misuse this power; do not be so merciless as to call down heaven's punishment upon his mercilessness. . . . If the rich person is stingy and close-fisted . . . then you be rich in mercifulness! Mercifulness works wonders . . . it makes the stingy gift into a larger sum if the poor person mercifully does not upbraid the rich for it, makes the morose giver less guilty if the poor man mercifully hides it.' (322–23) 'Be

merciful to us more fortunate ones! Your care-filled life is like a dangerous protest against the loving Governance; therefore you have it in your power to alarm the rest of us – so be merciful! . . . Indeed, which is more merciful: powerfully to remedy the needs of others or quietly to suffer and patiently to watch mercifully lest one destroy the joy and happiness of others?’ (326) These are, to say the least, unexpected claims in a discourse on love. The only justification is that Kierkegaard, master rhetorician, offers this ‘in confidence,’ so to speak, to *this* audience.

The entire discussion admittedly puts a premium on the exercise of mercifulness *rather than* either generosity or the alleviation of suffering. But it should be noted that (1) a stark distinction between mercifulness and alleviation of suffering serves to qualify the relevance of results, given our inability to control all the outcomes of our actions, and (2) the distinction between generosity and mercifulness serves to reassure one that all have equal potential to fulfill their duty. An emphasis on the alleviation of suffering could be said to have put an undue value on a capacity to provide externals (a capacity not all have to the same degree). In other words, this anti-consequentialist emphasis is in support of the claim that meritorious fulfillment of duty is not conditional on particular temporal circumstances and achievements – fruits of love are equally possible to all.

The attempt to deflect concern with temporal conditions (consequences) because fruits of love may be materially ineffective does not entail acosmic other-worldliness – it need not empty content from the duty to help the neighbor enjoy fulfillment of the purpose for which each was created, in and through God’s creation, and hence the duty to help alleviate those conditions which hinder that fullness. To put the efforts of the poor into perspective, he reminds them that the ‘well-intentioned’ call to remedy temporal need ‘has a sensate conception of the size of the gift and of the ability to do something to remedy the need’. (326) His counter-claim – that ‘the most important thing is that mercifulness be practiced, or that the help is the help of mercifulness’ and therefore that ‘From the point of view of eternity, that someone dies is no misfortune, but that mercifulness is not practiced certainly is’ – is a response to the cry that ‘the most important thing is that help be given,’ where help is understood in terms of ‘the size of the gift’. Given the particular audience he addresses, such reminders encourage each one to see what he/she can do as significant, and hence encourage each to do what he/she

can. Nothing in this need serve to excuse those with more from doing more. No one can legitimately draw the conclusion from this discussion that one has no duty to help people with fewer resources – that would be committing the fallacy of assuming that because some people are told that they ought to love you, *you* are excused from the obligation to love *them*.

One could, of course, argue that Kierkegaard's practical instruction is better than his theorizing, or that his theorizing is dangerous precisely because it is able to be misunderstood. In the end, one could still have doubts about whether Kierkegaard makes the right choice when he decides, as the speaker, 'to speak to the poor about practicing mercifulness' rather than 'to speak to the rich about practicing generosity'. (321–22) But given that choice of audience, the advice is not inappropriate, nor is it able to provide an excuse for the rich not to practice generosity.

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