

Revolutionary Neighbor-Love: Kierkegaard, Marx, and Social Reform

Richard R. EVA*

C. Stephen EVANS**

Baylor University

Abstract. In this paper we compare Kierkegaard's and Marx's views on social reform. Then we argue that Kierkegaard's own reasoning is consistent with the expression of neighbor-love through collective action, *i.e.* social reform. However, Kierkegaard's approach to social reform would be vastly different than Marx's. We end by reviewing several questions that Kierkegaardian social reformers would ask themselves. Our hope is that this exploration will provide helpful insights into how those who genuinely love their neighbors ought to seek the common good through collective action.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, Marx, social reform, neighbor-love, equality, worldly-dissimilarities.

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) is not famous for his views on social reform. In fact, he has been sharply criticized for his noticeable lack of support for social reform. Contemporaneously, only a few hundred miles away, the philosopher best known for his views on social reform was at work: Karl Marx (1818-1883). These philosophers are infrequently brought into conversation, likely because their views are so opposed, but drawing a

* **Richard R. Eva** is a philosophy Ph.D. student at Baylor University specializing in ethics, political philosophy, and philosophy of law. He studied philosophy as an undergraduate at Princeton University where he graduated with honors. He has a paper on religious liberty forthcoming in *Southwest Philosophy Review*.

** **C. Stephen Evans** received his Ph.D. in philosophy from Yale University. He is currently University Professor of Philosophy and Humanities at Baylor University. He previously held positions at Calvin University and St. Olaf College, where he was Curator of the Hong Kierkegaard Library. He has published widely on Kierkegaard, and in philosophy of religion and ethics. His most recent book is *Kierkegaard and Spirituality: Accountability as the Meaning of Human Existence*.

comparison between them can help highlight what a Kierkegaardian social reformer would look like if there were such a thing.

In this paper we compare Kierkegaard's and Marx's views on social reform. Then we argue that Kierkegaard's own reasoning is consistent with the expression of neighbor-love through collective action, *i.e.* social reform. However, Kierkegaard's approach to social reform would be vastly different than Marx's. We end by reviewing several questions that a Kierkegaardian social reformer would consider: (i) What is the end-goal of social reform? (ii) Am I idolizing social reform? (iii) Am I presupposing love in others? (iv) Am I loving my enemies? It is worth noting that while Kierkegaard directed much of his work towards Christians, given his context in Christendom, there is no reason in principle why non-Christians could not agree with Kierkegaard on the importance of neighbor-love and its general precepts. Our hope is that this exploration will provide helpful insights into how those who genuinely love their neighbors ought to seek the common good through collective action.

Marx and Social Reform

A practical materialist¹ and atheist, Marx was “before all else a revolutionist.”² He envisioned communism as “the riddle of history resolved.”³ In his view, history can be characterized as the oppressed and oppressors in constant opposition to one another.⁴ The imminent communist revolution would eliminate this class struggle and would be made necessary by the changing economic forces of production.⁵ In Marx's early writings, he identified the major source of class conflict as the alienation of the

¹ Karl Marx, “The German Ideology”, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 169.

² Friedrich Engels, “Speech at the Graveside of Karl Marx”, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 682.

³ Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844”, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 84.

⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 474 & 483.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 474.

proletariat from their labour by the capitalist means of production. Interestingly, he thought Christianity produced a similar effect: “Christianity... accomplished... the alienation of man from himself and from nature.”⁶ Though religious alienation was grounded in economic alienation, all modes of alienation would be abolished in communist revolution; then men could finally claim a *real* relation to themselves.

Marx claimed that German philosophy thus far had its metaphysics backwards. Their philosophy descended from heaven to earth, whereas Marx’s philosophy ascended from earth to heaven.⁷ He said, “We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life process.”⁸ So, rather than seeing transcendent principles as foundational, Marx sees all of morality, religion, and metaphysics as *entirely* derivative of men’s material production and material intercourse.⁹ That is why the key was to alter the material economic forces of production; changes to the ideological superstructure would inevitably follow. Philosophizing, on its own, does nothing for us because it is merely the result of the material forces of production, that is why Marx claimed that the point of philosophizing is to change the world.¹⁰ Thus, social reform, *i.e.* revolution, is the primary objective of his philosophy.

The key to a successful revolution was to undermine the ruling class in every possible way. This would include forcibly overthrowing all existing social conditions, convincing the oppressed class of the hostility of their oppressors, and “support[ing] every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things.”¹¹ Many Marxists after Marx attempted to carry out this revolution. Unfortunately, this proved far more

⁶ Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 52.

⁷ Marx, “The German Ideology”, 154.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁰ Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach”, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 145.

¹¹ Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, 500.

difficult than Marx anticipated and resulted in millions of deaths. Yet, many are still hopeful that Marx's vision of social reform can come to fruition.

Kierkegaard's views on social reform are uninspiring by comparison. Kierkegaard and Marx were contemporaries in Europe, both raised Lutheran and well-educated in philosophy, especially in Hegelian and ancient Greek philosophy. Marx wrote his dissertation on Epicurus and Democritus,¹² while Kierkegaard wrote his dissertation on Socratic irony.¹³ It has even been recorded that Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* may have influenced certain people towards communism.¹⁴ Kierkegaard and Marx were both critics of Hegel in certain respects and, on certain points, that criticism coincided.¹⁵ However, their differences are more well known. Perhaps most obvious was that Kierkegaard was a devout Christian and Marx was an outspoken atheist.

Marx claimed, "The more a man puts into God, the less he retains in himself."¹⁶ He thought that the God-relationship alienated man from himself, and that this unnecessary mediation caused man to lack a real relation to himself. He thought that "God" was the result of man's objectification of his own essence by projecting it upon an "alien and fantastic being."¹⁷ Marx thought that man could truly become *himself* in communism. He claimed that the proletariat must overthrow the state in order "to assert themselves as individuals."¹⁸ The pursuit of social reform was directly tied to becoming one's true self.

This idea seems directly opposed to Kierkegaard's view of selfhood. For Kierkegaard, one can only become one's true self by relating to God. In *Sickness Unto Death*, the pseudonym Anti-Climacus famously gives an account of selfhood, saying that, "the self is a relation that relates itself to

¹² Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: The Founders, the Golden Age, the Breakdown* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), 83.

¹³ William McDonald, "Søren Kierkegaard", Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Edward N. Zalta, last modified Winter 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kierkegaard/>.

¹⁴ Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 993.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1171.

¹⁶ Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts", 72.

¹⁷ Marx, "On the Jewish Question", 52.

¹⁸ Marx, "The German Ideology", 200.

itself.”¹⁹ In order to be a self, one must synthesize contrasting elements within oneself (*i.e.* the infinite and the finite, the temporal and eternal, freedom and necessity), and this requires that “a self must either have established itself or have been established by another.”²⁰ Since God is the only self that can establish itself, one must relate to oneself by relating to God. So, one becomes one’s true self by relating to God; otherwise one will relate to oneself through something else. These alternative things could be referred to as idols. Kierkegaard’s character “A” in *Either/Or Part I* is a model of one who lacks a true self. He is an aesthete who aims for his life to be a collection of satisfying, even though mostly tragic, moments. In a sense, he is completely alienated from himself. For Marx, one is alienated from oneself through the God-relation (as well as through certain other relations). So, for Marx we become our true selves through social transformation, and for Kierkegaard we become our true selves through God.

Kierkegaard and Social Reform

Kierkegaard’s position on social reform is often criticized as too complacent and conservative. He was explicitly against certain rights for women, and he claimed that worldly similarity (*e.g.* equal rights for men and women) is not the same as Christian equality.²¹ However, at the same time, he praised the abolition of slavery and several improvements in the treatment of women on Christian grounds.²² To investigate this tension, we must begin with an exploration of his concept of neighbor-love.²³

¹⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 139.

²² C. S. Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press on Demand, 2004), 215.

²³ We utilize an interpretation of Kierkegaard’s concept of neighbor-love that is more fully described in C. S. Evans’s *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love*.

Works of Love explores the meaning of the command: “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”²⁴ This divine command creates a moral obligation grounded, not in God’s power, but in God’s love and his desire for the good of mankind. Our fulfillment of this command results in the promotion of our own good and, ultimately, our happiness. Loving our neighbors might require self-denial, but this self-denial is surprisingly consistent with self-fulfillment. It is in denying ourselves and loving our neighbors that we can attain true happiness. Kierkegaard poetically writes, “to love people is the only thing worth living for, and without this love you are not really living.”²⁵

This becomes clear if we understand what it means to love one’s neighbor. What does love *do*? Love seeks the good of all, and the ultimate good of all is God.²⁶ So, neighbor-love, at the least, desires that everyone love, know, and find themselves in God. Of course, as embodied creatures there are other goods that we should seek to provide our neighbors as well, but none are more important than the ultimate good. Notice that one’s own self is not left out of the command: the command presupposes self-love. But the self-love that humans typically have is a selfish kind of love; this is not the type of love that ought to be extended to others.²⁷ We must love ourselves and others rightly by wanting the true good for us all. Kierkegaard puts this succinctly: “To love God is to love oneself truly; to help another person to love God is to love another person; to be helped by another person to love God is to be loved.”²⁸

The next question arises naturally: who counts as one’s neighbor? The answer is simply all human beings.²⁹ Human beings may look different, but each has a “common watermark” in the light of eternity.³⁰ God created

²⁴ Matthew 22:39 ESV.

²⁵ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 375.

²⁶ Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love*, 178.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁸ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 107.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 141.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

all human beings, “placed love within them as their ground,”³¹ and gave them the capacity for love.³² Thus, every human being – every race, religion, sex, orientation, age etc – is within the scope of neighbor-love, and no one can be excluded. The surprising and often offensive thing about this command is that it also applies to our enemies and to the wicked. This is a love that makes no distinctions, and yet it is not blind to distinctions.³³ In fact, one must account for individual differences in order to love others rightly. For example, one’s spouse is the recipient of one’s neighbor-love, but what this requires of one is vastly different from what neighbor-love might require of them with respect to a casual acquaintance.

But how could one possibly love *every* person in this way? Obviously, Kierkegaard does not expect us to reach out to several billion people. In fact, he thinks it is possible to satisfy the command of neighbor-love even if one were alone on a desert island.³⁴ How could this be? One answer is that the command to love is a command to develop an enduring emotion; such an emotion is a ‘concern-based construal.’³⁵ Today we often think of love as a ‘feeling’ or an ‘episodic emotion,’ something that comes and goes outside of our control.³⁶ Kant likely thought of emotions in this way, and that is why he thought we had duties to act *regardless* of our feelings.³⁷ Robert Roberts provides an account of emotion as a concern-based construal, which is a helpful way to understand neighbor-love.³⁸ He claims an emotion is a construal, which is a ‘seeing-as.’ So, with neighbor-love, we can choose to *see* our neighbors *as* creatures of God, made in his image, grounded in love, and with the potential for love. In other words, we can choose to see them as God sees them. Now, construing is not always under our immediate voluntary control, but we can take steps to construe in loving

³¹ Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love*, 172.

³² *Ibid.*, 188.

³³ *Ibid.*, 178-179.

³⁴ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 21.

³⁵ Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love*, 190-191.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 190.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 191.

³⁸ Robert C. Roberts, “What an Emotion is: A Sketch”, *The Philosophical Review* 97, no. 2 (1988). doi:10.2307/2185261.

ways, *i.e.* we can cultivate a loving disposition.³⁹ If we understand neighbor-love in this way as a disposition, it makes sense that it could be commanded and accomplished, even without neighbors present. When we encounter actual people, this disposition will result in concrete loving actions. And one can have a disposition to love all those one encounters, though of course, one will not literally encounter every person.

Specific actions of love that ought to arise from this disposition can be made known to us through our individual callings. This might be through one's own giftings or desires,⁴⁰ or through geographical, logistical, or providential proximity.⁴¹ Notably, Kierkegaard thinks that some individuals' callings could be inconsistent with one another. For example, neighbor-love may call one person to buy a homeless person a meal, while it may call another person to walk past that homeless person but donate money to a homeless shelter. In any case, neighbor-love does not allow either person to regard that homeless person (or anyone else) as 'out-of-scope.' So, there is not a universally correct way of practicing neighbor-love for each person, but there is a universal call to love our neighbors.

Given that neighbor-love takes into account the distinctiveness of others, Kierkegaard thought neighbor-love was perfectly consistent with a hierarchical political structure.⁴² For example, one could recognize a king as someone whom they ought to honor, and as someone with special rights or powers, while also recognizing that the king is fundamentally equal as a neighbor. Here we begin to see why Kierkegaard's position on social reform could be seen as too conservative. It looks as though people could be ostensibly unequal (*e.g.* having different rights), while being equal in another, spiritual sense. Kierkegaard explicitly said, "worldly equality, if it were possible, is not Christian equality."⁴³ He thought Christianity "allow[ed] all the dissimilarities of earthly life to stand,"⁴⁴ and called people

³⁹ Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 192.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 209.

⁴³ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 72.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

to lift themselves above these worldly dissimilarities.⁴⁵ This view can be seen in his push against equal rights for women and his lack of support for basically any social reform (e.g. reducing economic inequality).⁴⁶ And yet Kierkegaard praised past social reforms like the abolition of slavery and the improved treatment of women while attributing some of these improvements to Christianity.⁴⁷

We think that Kierkegaard's own logic ought to have led him to see that social reform could be an important aspect of neighbor-love. Kierkegaard's lack of enthusiasm for social reform stems, in part, from a conviction that support for social reform can be a cheap substitute for actually loving the neighbor.⁴⁸ In his time, Kierkegaard saw wealthy Danes who would not dare to be seen among the poor, but who were happy to condescend and contribute to their plight from afar.⁴⁹ These were people who lacked love in their concrete relations with others, and deceived themselves into thinking they were merciful and loving. Kierkegaard pushes back in the opposite direction by claiming that what is important is not social reform, but neighbor-love that is expressed in concrete ways with actual people.

Thus, Kierkegaard's extreme position is at least partially explained by historical context. Moreover, the reasoning behind Kierkegaard's support for the abolition of slavery and the improved treatment of women, would seem to support further social reforms as well.⁵⁰ While supporting 'loving' social policies is often a cheap substitute for actual neighbor-love, it does not follow that supporting loving social policies is *always* a cheap substitute for neighbor-love. Kierkegaard may be right to assume that there will always be some forms of worldly dissimilarity, and right in claiming that those who love their neighbors are called to rise above worldly dissimilarities. However, it does not follow that we ought to be indifferent to every form of worldly dissimilarity.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁴⁷ Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 215.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁴⁹ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 75.

⁵⁰ Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 220.

Some worldly dissimilarities may be oppressive and possible to fix. Neighbor-love requires the lover to seek the other's good, and part of their good as embodied creatures includes bodily goods, like food and shelter. As social creatures, their good might also include social goods, like equal legal treatment or protection from coercion. To ignore the full spectrum of goods would be to ignore the uniquely multifaceted creatures that we are, and it would be a failure to love people as they actually exist. So, if there is a social policy that one can support that might reduce hunger and prevent starvation, it seems that neighbor-love could call one to support that policy. Likewise, if there is a policy that would protect others from racial discrimination, neighbor-love could call one to support that policy. Of course, there will be arguments about which policies are *actually* loving, but there is nothing in principle incoherent with neighbor-love calling one into collective loving action. Kierkegaard thought that, “[g]enuine neighbor-love... that contents itself merely with verbal declarations or support for general policies is suspect.”⁵¹ However, we think that it is also true that “a love that shows no concern for collective, cooperative action is also suspect,” and that Kierkegaard's own view of neighbor-love supports this.⁵²

Reflections for Kierkegaardian Reformers

So, if social reform is a viable outlet for expressing neighbor-love, how would Kierkegaardian reformers do so? We suggest several items that Kierkegaardian reformers would reflect on when approaching and engaging in social reform. They would (i) consider the end-goal, (ii) consider whether social reform is an idol, (iii) consider whether they are presupposing love in others, and (iv) consider whether they are loving their enemies.⁵³

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ This list is not intended to be exhaustive.

(i) The End-Goal

For Marx, the end-goal of social reform – *i.e.* revolution – was communism. Revolution was geared towards creating a classless society, where men could “become accomplished in any branch” of society they like, and they could “hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon... just as [they] have in mind.”⁵⁴ They would have more time for leisure, be perfectly equal, and finally enjoy their work. This was to be man’s true salvation. Striving towards a perfectly equal society is present in much of today’s political rhetoric, often tied up with the hope that through social reform we can eliminate suffering and evil: if only we could give humans the resources, then they would not steal; if only we could reduce inequality, then they would not covet; if only we did not repress sexual desires, then they would not quarrel etc.

Kierkegaardian reformers on the other hand, would recognize that a perfect earthly society is not the end-goal and is not possible. Unlike Marx, the Kierkegaardian will not see the political community as the means of salvation. Kierkegaard’s position can be summarized as follows: “Human efforts to transform human society can never be equated with the kingdom of God itself... [and] what is genuinely divine and transcendent cannot be identified with the temporal order without being fatally compromised.”⁵⁵ Kierkegaard claimed worldly similarity is not Christian equality, and furthermore he thought complete worldly similarity is impossible.⁵⁶ Surely in the presence of human imperfection, it is impossible for there to be a perfect earthly kingdom where all are perfectly equal. While this impossibility should not stop Kierkegaardian reformers from loving others through social reform, this harsh reality should cause them to reflect on the end-goal of their love. Neighbor-love ultimately wants the good for others. And while the good for embodied, social creatures certainly includes bodily and social goods, the fullest conception of the good is incomplete without the ultimate good, God. In other words, if one seeks to provide all manner of

⁵⁴ Marx, *The German Ideology*, 160.

⁵⁵ Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love*, 329.

⁵⁶ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 72.

bodily and social goods to others, but not what ultimately brings about eternal happiness, one does not truly love. Kierkegaard reminds us that death is no misfortune in eternity, *i.e.* we all die.⁵⁷ So, Kierkegaardian reformers must ask: what am I helping people *for*?⁵⁸

(ii) Idolizing Social Reform

For Marx, there is a sense in which God himself is an idol. As mentioned earlier, Marx thinks we can develop a *real* relation to ourselves by eliminating the God-relationship, and we can do this through social revolution. If we change the material forces of production, we can usher in the age of communist humanity and develop real relationships with ourselves and the world. For Marx, the concept of God can keep us from becoming our true selves and prevent us from pursuing social reform.

Kierkegaardian reformers, on the other hand, would be careful not to allow social reform itself to become an idol. Earlier we mentioned Kierkegaard's view that one becomes one's true self by relating to oneself through relating to God. When one relates to oneself through something other than God, that thing can be called an idol. Thus, Kierkegaardian reformers would not relate to themselves through their "cause" as if this was the centre of their identity. When they pursue their cause, they would not mistake that cause for the true good, God; in other words, they would keep their priorities straight. It is common to see the opposite of this today: a lover may originally support a cause out of true neighbor-love, but eventually, after pursuing the cause intensely, they forget exactly how it is tied to their love for God and others. They cease to listen for their individual call and shut out other avenues for neighbor-love. The cause itself takes over their life and becomes

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 326.

⁵⁸ An unsettling question could be asked here: Bodily goods often seem to be detrimental to one's pursuit of the true good, *e.g.* "It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." – Matthew 19:24 ESV. So, are there times when we ought to withhold bodily goods out of love for our neighbors? One could respond by distinguishing between bodily goods that are excesses and those that are necessities and claim that only excesses are detrimental to one's pursuit of the true good, but necessities are not. But we wonder if this is a satisfactory answer.

an idol, in the sense that their identity and worth as a person is wholly contained in the cause. While they began as true lovers of their neighbors motivated to engage in social reform, they may end up as social reformers who happen to love some of their neighbors. Kierkegaardian reformers would be wary of this temptation and attentive to changing and multifarious calls for their neighbor-love.

Kierkegaardian reformers will also be aware of the temptation to idolize the reputation of a social reformer. This is one of the things Kierkegaard disdained about his well-off contemporaries, the ones who championed policies to help the poor but did not want to be seen as equal to them in their actual lives. They loved the appearance of being social reformers but had no true neighbor-love. Today this temptation is exacerbated by social media. One can be recognized by thousands as a social reformer through a few clicks of a button. Again, intentions may start out genuine, but one can easily be pulled into comparison. A person might notice that others do not post on social media like oneself – that others do not ‘show support’ – and this can build one’s pride and give one a sense of a moral superiority. This feeling of praise and moral superiority can be addicting; so addicting, in fact, that the posting of ‘support’ on social media for one’s own gain now has its own name: “virtue-signaling.” Kierkegaardian reformers will be wary of this temptation and heavily weigh Jesus’ command not to “sound a trumpet” when giving to the needy.⁵⁹

(iii) Presuppose Love

Kierkegaardian reformers will consider Jesus’ rhetorical question, “Why do you see the splinter in your brother’s eye but do not see the log that is in your own?”⁶⁰ Kierkegaard’s interpretation of this verse is revealing. He thinks that it does not merely mean that we should not judge others, but that the “splinter, or seeing it judgingly, *is a log*.”⁶¹ That is, seeing judgingly *is* the log in one’s own eye. People often forget that God is omnipresent, and

⁵⁹ Matthew 6:2.

⁶⁰ Matthew 7:5.

⁶¹ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 382. (italics added)

this forgetfulness allows them to have a false sense of security from which to discover others' splinters. But Kierkegaard says, "At a moment when you really think God is present, it surely would not occur to you to see any splinter in your brother's eye or occur to you to apply this dreadfully rigorous criterion—you who are guilty yourself."⁶² If one is aware of God's presence, the last thing on one's mind would be the sins of others. One would be fearfully aware of their own sinfulness.

Considering this, what should our posture be towards others? Of course, we should love them as our neighbors, but Kierkegaard posits that neighbor-love requires that we "presuppose love in others."⁶³ Given that love is the source of everything⁶⁴ and God created humans with love as their ground, every human has the capacity to love. To love them is to "presuppose that love is in the other person's heart,"⁶⁵ and this presupposition builds up love in that person. Presupposing love entails, among other things, interpreting others' actions in charitable ways when possible and looking for mitigating explanations for their wrong actions.⁶⁶ Many of us have experienced how valuable this type of love can be. For example, here are two different postures a husband may have towards his wife when he feels like she is giving him the cold shoulder: With an unloving posture he may think (i) "I do not deserve this because I did not do anything wrong", (ii) "she is acting wrongly", or (iii) "I would never do something like this to her." These thoughts may build resentment or frustration in him and will likely affect his subsequent actions towards her. On the other hand, he could presuppose love in his wife, thinking, (i) "perhaps she is not actually giving me the cold shoulder and I have misinterpreted the situation", (ii) "perhaps I deserve the cold shoulder, did I hurt her in some way?", or (iii) "she must be tired from a long day." This latter reaction does not build up resentment, but mercy and humility. The husband's subsequent actions would then be coloured by his

⁶² *Ibid.*, 383.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁶⁶ Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 165.

love for her, not his judgment. To love is to cultivate the disposition that sees love in others.

An apparent tension does arise at this point when we consider that the recognition of a wrong is sometimes loving. When there is a blatant wrong, the lover is not always called to make an excuse for it. For instance, if the husband *knows* his wife is having an affair with another man, he should not think, “they are probably just close friends.” To presuppose love is to have a posture that, *when possible*, construes others’ actions in a loving light. But in some cases, this is not possible because one cannot reasonably construe the actions in any other way – one cannot avoid the conclusion that a wrong has been done. On the other hand, it is indeed possible for the husband to construe his wife’s subtle reactions (*e.g.* the cold shoulder) in a loving way because they admit of various plausible interpretations.

In cases of clear unfaithfulness, abuse, or other obvious wrongs, it even seems *unloving* to make excuses for the perpetrator. Since love desires the good of the other, helping the other to recognize their wrong may be an important step towards their obtaining goods in life, particularly God. The husband may be enabling his wife’s unfaithfulness by feigning ignorance, which only allows her to drift further from life’s true goods. The true lover will recognize wrongs when they cannot reach any other conclusion and when it is loving to do so. But the important thing to notice is that the posture of presupposing love remains. Whether recognizing wrongs or thinking the best of someone, the true lover consistently maintains the disposition to presuppose love in others – they are not *looking for* wrongs.

The posture of presupposing love presented by Kierkegaard is fundamentally *anti-critical*. Kierkegaard says, “you have *nothing at all* to do with what others do unto you – it does not concern you... You have to do only with what you do unto others, or how you take what others do unto you. The direction is inward; essentially you have to do only with yourself before

God.”⁶⁷ The true lover’s posture is not one that concerns itself primarily with the faults of others, but one’s own faults.

This posture is diametrically opposed to that of Marx and his followers. Marx thought that external criticism was a crucial method of advancement in history. In order to usher in revolution, the communists needed to encourage criticism. They must “everywhere support *every* revolutionary movement [not only the communist revolution] against the existing social and political order of things.”⁶⁸ It was not particularly important what these other revolutionary movements stood *for*, but what they stood *against*. The Marxist Antonio Gramsci said, “The cultural aspect, above all, will be negative, directed towards criticism of the past, obliterating it from memory and destroying it.”⁶⁹ This critique was not to be limited to the abstract system of oppression, but also to those who supported the system – it was vital for the masses to see them as the enemy. Marx said that the communists must never cease to “instill the clearest possible recognition of hostile antagonism between parties.”⁷⁰ It was crucial to make people as conscious as possible of the wrongs of the other side, to cultivate a posture of seeing antagonism in their actions. This would naturally instigate conflict and, ultimately, revolution. An aid to this project would be to encourage the oppressed class to see themselves as fundamentally distinct from the oppressor class. The oppressed class was to create a distinct culture of their own, with their own values, which the ruling class could not relate to, speak into, or appropriate for their own ends.

The posture of the Marxist was to seek to find the splinter in the other’s eye; this is how they thought progress was made. Kierkegaardian reformers will have a habit of seeing the best in others, even in their enemies. Also, they will not find their identity fundamentally in their dissimilarity. Kierkegaard said, “Each one of us is a human being and then in turn the

⁶⁷ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 383-384 (italics added). Given what is said in the previous paragraph we interpret Kierkegaard as speaking hyperbolically at this point. It is not possible or desirable to never have views about what others have done to you.

⁶⁸ Marx, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 500 (italics added)

⁶⁹ Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 982.

⁷⁰ Marx, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 500.

distinctive individual that he is in particular, but to be a human being is the fundamental category. No one should become so enamoured of his dissimilarity that he cravenly or presumptuously forgets that he is a human being.”⁷¹

(iv) Love one’s enemies

Lastly, Kierkegaardian reformers will love their enemies. When pushing for social reform, one will inevitably find new enemies. Almost every social reform policy has opposition today. One might support, say, government-funded universal healthcare, while others completely deny its importance, and still others disagree about how a policy should be implemented. It is easy to fall into the hostility that surrounds such issues. It has become the norm to demonize and humiliate those who oppose your views and to seek to eliminate their voice from the public domain. It is the norm to only see evil, ignorance, and hate in the actions of the opposition.⁷² And too often we seek only to win the issue rather than to win the person, but true love seeks to win the one who has been overcome and achieve reconciliation.⁷³

Of course, we must stand firm on our convictions and oppose unloving actions and policies – Kierkegaard says, “It would be a weakness, not love, to make the unloving one believe that he was right in the evil he did.”⁷⁴ But we also must seek to be reconciled to the opposition if we are successful. Kierkegaard says that as soon as we win the battle on a particular issue and hope to celebrate, religious consideration leads us into a new battle, a battle against self-righteousness and for reconciliation.⁷⁵ It is all too easy to feel morally superior when we win on an issue. And, often, the most

⁷¹ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 141.

⁷² Here is an interesting thought: how many people who have supported a losing political candidate, can name a single praiseworthy thing the opposing political candidate accomplished during their term? It is terribly difficult to untrain our tendency to see the worst.

⁷³ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 337.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 338.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 333.

satisfying moment is when the other side concedes; one is tempted to relish their repentance or confession. But Kierkegaard thinks that the true lover's reaction would be to lay aside pleas for forgiveness in "holy abhorrence" as something not due to the lover, but to God.⁷⁶ The true lover does not want the other to feel that the lover is superior and will aim to prevent the humiliation of the other.⁷⁷ It is in this way that the lover is obeying the urgent command to seek to be reconciled.⁷⁸

Rarely do we see apologies in debates on social reform, but the dual aim of winning the issue *and* the person ought to change how Kierkegaardian reformers approach and interact with the opposition. Because they do not solely aim to win the issue, they will consider ways to support social reform while also preparing for the 'second battle.' Perhaps the reformer will shift their thinking from, "How can I beat them?" to "How can I help them understand?" This second question would require the reformer to seek to understand the opposition for themselves and convey things in ways that they could comprehend. Of course, this method should only be used to the extent that it is truly loving to do so – this will require discernment. For example, we expect that certain opponents (*e.g.* hate groups) cannot be reasoned with and that the most loving thing to do would be to push forward reform without engaging them until afterwards. But, in any case, the correct posture is love towards the enemy. The true lover will have the uncomfortable and somewhat offensive aim of winning over even the most wicked opposition. Kierkegaardian reformers may push for temporal goods in social reform, but they will also remember that there is an eternal good that can be provided to the souls of their enemies.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 341.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 341.

⁷⁸ "First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." – Matthew 5:24 ESV.

Conclusion

Kierkegaard is not known for his progressive views on social reform, but we think that Kierkegaard's own reasoning would imply that neighbor-love should support at least some movements for social reform. People may be called by neighbor-love to support certain social reforms, provided that their love is also expressed through concrete relations with others. The way a Kierkegaardian would pursue social reform is distinctive. It is in opposition to the most famous philosopher of social reform, Marx, and the many social reformers he influenced. Kierkegaardian reformers will remember that God is the true end-goal, and they will avoid the temptation to idolize reform. They will presuppose love in others with an anti-critical posture, and they will love their enemies. If true lovers pursued social reform in this manner, this would be nothing short of revolutionary.

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