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REVOLUTIONARY LOVE: KIERKEGAARD'S GIFT ECONOMY AS A RELIGIOUS CORRECTIVE TO THE LEVELING OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

One does not typically associate Kierkegaard with social theory. Instead, he is remembered as one of the foremost among a sizable constellation of nineteenth century thinkers who were shifting intellectual focus to philosophies of the individual. However, Kierkegaard does propose a normative social theory modeled on a form of personal interaction that aims to alleviate group conflict and large-scale social disintegration. Particularly in *Works of Love*—published one year before *The Communist Manifesto*—Kierkegaard elaborates an existential-religious form of revolution that he presents as a rival initiative that is superior to any revolutionism rooted in political economy. In what follows, I have stitched together Kierkegaard's critique of modernity, particularly as it pertains to his aversive concept of the public. Rather than prescribing an ascetic retreat from society, the consummate philosopher of "that single individual"[1] agitates for a revolution predicated on an agapeic gift economy that he claims will repair pervasive social fragmentation and antagonism, thereby creating a more integrated and peaceful society.

Kierkegaard claims that modernity is characterized by a process of *leveling*. This concept is akin to Marx's alienation and to Marcuse's notion of one dimensionality. In his view, modernity not only leads individuals to be standardized and estranged from one another, but is also the source of antagonism among social groups, which ultimately gives rise to a condition of volatile sectarianism. Kierkegaard argues that, to overcome the leveling effects of modernity, "an entirely different revolution…must take place."[2] Particularly in *Works of Love*, where Kierkegaard describes the particulars of this corrective, he makes subtle use of the dual sense of revolution [*omdrejning*]. It suggests both political upheaval and resistance to the established order, and an existential turning [*omdrejning*] away from "externality," toward the other, God, and love. He explains that this existential-religious revolution must begin with the turn to *inwardness*. In Kierkegaard's use of the term, turning inward is not the existential equivalent of sticking one's head in the sand in order to turn away from the world. Rather, inwardness is a religious relation and as such requires that one turn toward the other and to God as well as to the self. The revolutionary self-other-God relation is complex and often seemingly paradoxical, or as Kierkegaard has put it, appears to be both too much and too little, but by analyzing this relation we find that Kierkegaard proposes that an agapeic gift economy can serve as a remedy to the small and large-scale ills of modernity. For Kierkegaard, a revolution modeled on an

[1] Soren Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993), 4.

[2] Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995), 102.

agapeic gift economy is superior to any that remains mired in the relations of political economy, as these revolutions, even when intended to liberate, remain tied to the existential mode of entitlement, self-love, and envy. Such a form of revolution merely plays on the surface of things, "as it were, upon the back of a tiger," and only serves to reestablish a leveling equality among individuals.

Inwardness and Revolution

It is Kierkegaard's emphasis on correcting the existential mode of self-other relation that connects his various critiques of the public and the Church. He argues that each sphere is being damaged by misrelation, which can be remedied by turning to the religious mode of intersubjective inwardness. For Kierkegaard, inwardness is a relation and must be distinguished from naval-gazing or a disavowal of the world. When he writes of inwardness, outwardness, and of externality, he is referring to modes of comportment to others and to oneself. The revolutionary relation, he writes, "belongs to this world of inwardness. It turns itself away and will turn you away from externality (*but without taking you out of the world*), will turn you upward and inward."[3] It is in the mode of relationality that Kierkegaard locates his critique of the modern public. He argues that the modern concept of the public is the "monstrous abstraction" that acts as the "master of leveling" which has rendered political and religious authority meaningless through a process of equivocation.[4] He writes that the "abstraction of leveling is a principle that forms no personal, intimate relation to any particular individual, but only the relation of abstractions, which is the same for all."[5] That is, the public is not a community or a congregation but is rather an abstraction that severs authentic intersubjectivity and prevents the formation of transformative relations between individuals. Turning to abstraction and reflection, then, are not aspects of inwardness—as one might characterize interiority—but is instead the nature of the leveling equivocation of the public which, rather than recognizing single individuals, only relates to others as to an abstract numerical component of the undifferentiated whole. Kierkegaard prophetically warns, "take away the relations, and there will be chaos…remove the relation and we have the tumultuous self-relating of the mass to an idea."[6] For, when the individual is not "essentially turned inward" in the proper relation to the other and to the self, "everything becomes meaningless externality."[7] When each citizen becomes an abstraction, equivocated with the public itself, each one ceases to be "that single individual."

But, one might ask, if Kierkegaard locates the loss of individual autonomy and self-affirmation in the individual's association with a social whole, polis, or congregation, then would he not claim that community is antithetical to the individual's capacity to stand alone? We must recall that for Kierkegaard, revolutionary religious inwardness is not Kantian autonomy or liberal individualism. The individual's ability to be weaned from mass culture necessitates not separatism, but the proper mode of

[3] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 384.

[4] Soren Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978), 84, 76.

[5] Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, 83.

[6] Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, 63.

[7] Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, 62.

relation with others in the formation of a unified congregation of differentiated individuals who become unified by an ideal, but one that is lived and continually reproduced. He writes, "the public is not a people, not a generation, not one's age, not a congregation, not an association, not some particular persons, for all these are what they are only by being concretions."[8] This process of abstraction called the public, then, does not facilitate solidarity among those within the homogeneous collective because "individuals do not in inwardness turn away from each other, do not turn outward in unanimity for an idea, but mutually turn to each other in a frustrating and suspicious, aggressive, leveling reciprocity."[9] This is because, in Kierkegaard's view, the notion of the public is a fiction created by the media to conjure communal unification where there only exists a numerical collection. He writes, "only when there is no strong communal life to give substance to the concretion will the press create this abstraction 'the public,' made up of unsubstantial individuals who are never united or never can be united in the simultaneity of any situation or organization and yet are claimed to be a whole."[10] The public, then, is a sum of undifferentiated individuals who are subsumed in leveling abstraction, and as such become nothing, whereas a congregation is composed of a "deliberative union of individuals in their difference" whose "unanimity of separation" reconciles unification with existential differentiation.[11] The public, for Kierkegaard, is not a congregation. The former is only able to develop in the absence of the mode of relation that constitutes the latter. Rather than hindering existential-religious inwardness, communities built from the ground of sacrificial economy—which will be further defined below—secure the individual's capacity to stand alone; the latter being only truly possible when the individual can relate to others in the proper manner.

For Kierkegaard, the same lack of a "relation of inwardness" that damages interpersonal relations becomes translated into large-scale political upheavals, forms of life, and systems of value. Kierkegaard holds that the absence of earnest inwardness characterizes the abstract equivocation characteristic of materially-oriented revolution as well as sectarian fundamentalism and militant nationalism. Reflecting on past communist revolutions in light of Kierkegaard's position, Martin Matuštik notes that they have often been "marked by leveling" insofar as they "forge equality by making the crowd the sovereign."[12] The single individual becomes negated in the leveling of the crowd; whereas in the congregation, individuals remain unified in their mutual separation. Further, insofar as Marxist revolutions—from a Kierkegaardian perspective—are carried out in the mode of resentful entitlement and are fought to invert the holdings of "*mine* and *yours*," "*envy*"—rather than the relation of inwardness and love—"becomes the *negatively unifying principle*."[13] Similarly, when there is an absence of an asymmetrically agapeic relation to the other, as is the proper mode of religious inwardness, opposing spheres of cultural, national, or doctrinal value "do not relate to each other but stand, as it

[8] Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, 92-93.

[9] Quoted in Martin Beck Matuštik, *Postnational Identity: Critical Theory and Existential Philosophy in Habermas, Kierkegaard, and Havel* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993), 236.

[10] Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, 91.

[11] Matuštik, *Postnational Identity*, 240.

[12] Matuštik, *Postnational Identity*, 240.

[13] Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, 81.

were, and carefully watch each other, *and this tension is actually the termination of the relation*."[14] Violent group antagonism and the leveling effects of the public are a consequence of an intersubjective misrelation. Insofar as this misrelation remains unrecognized, it is carried over into the very revolutions that attempt to liberate the people from the effects of the misrelation. The retained misrelation is evident in the form of political conflict and in processes of religious fundamentalism that often serve as a defensive response to them. Kierkegaard proposes—as a permanently lived corrective to these processes and the rebellions that retain the dysfunctions they oppose—an *agapeic revolution* where an asymmetrical gift economy characterizes the mode of self-other relations.

Kierkegaard's Agapeic Gift Economy

In his late authorship, Kierkegaard more clearly articulates the social ontology that has implicitly grounded his previous works, calling for his readership to reassess the site and mode of Kierkegaard's beginnings, the starting point of existential relation. Kierkegaard asserts that, in a sense, we persist in a revolutionary mode insofar as we are called to re/turn to difficult beginnings. He writes,

> This is how we are continually *turned back* to that thought of God's, the first thought about the human being. In the busy, teeming crowd, which as companionship is both too much and too little, a person grows weary of society; but the cure is not to make the discovery that God's thought was wrong—no, the cure is simply *to learn all over again* that first thought, to be conscious of longing for companionship.[15]

In the face of modernity's decline and the wounds inflicted by the crowd mentality, we mustn't despair over sociality, rather, our difficult task is to re/turn to God's first thought, to learn all over again how to love the other in the proper mode. The properly qualified mode of relation to the other is one that, for Kierkegaard, is a self-annihilating, kenotic economy of love where the individual loves all others infinitely and non-preferentially, earnestly giving everything without expectation or desire for reciprocation. The kenotic relation to the other is one of radical humility. When one relates to the other, they, at the same moment, relate to God and "to relate yourself to God, [is] to become nothing."[16] Moreover, the difficulty of beginnings is an element of the revolutionary mode of Kierkegaard's agapeic gift economy: "this annihilation before God is so blessed that you at every moment would seek to return to this annihilation more intensely."[17]

For Kierkegaard, the gift economy of kenotic love is more radically revolutionary and far superior to those movements that remain grounded in political economy. The latter remain in the thrall of the finite economy of equal exchange and the worldly categories of public relation that it produces rather than recognizing that alterations in class standing change nothing at all. In a journal entry Kierkegaard writes, "it is very fatuous to want to make the poorer classes impatient with their condition. The small

[14] Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, 78.

[15] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 154.

[16] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 103.

[17] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 103.

worldly alteration that may be achieved is nevertheless as nothing."[18] Instead, he advocates a revolution that re/turns to the difficult beginnings of altering—not the possession of material or the level of one's public esteem—but of transforming *how* we love, *how* we relate to others. For Kierkegaard this is far more radical than a reversal of fortune that retains a sense of entitlement and exchange, as is evident in the very offensiveness of what it implies. For what is qualitatively distinct about Kierkegaard's revolutionary gift economy is its mode of givenness—the emphasis on "how it is given,"[19] how works of love are performed, which is directly antithetical to the reciprocal exchange of commerce.

Kierkegaard writes that "love is…sacrifice,"[20] therefore, to love earnestly one must give everything, must remain permanently indebted to the other in a mode that is truly without expectation or sense of repayment. Agapeic love "is exactly the opposite of a claim…instead of having a claim on which to collect payment, to get a duty to perform…instead of passionately seeking admiration's luscious fruit" the individual gives all, and "it is by this change that love comes into existence."[21] But when, and only when, one enters into this economy in the properly qualitative mode, they receive an equal return of gracious love. Kierkegaard explains that God "takes everything, everything, everything—in order to give everything."[22] He "asks for everything, but as you bring it to him you immediately receive."[23] But this does not mean that God is a capitalist who seeks to amass your love, with redemption and grace doled out as your wage, rather "God does not ask for anything for himself, although he asks for everything from you."[24] Kierkegaard makes a subtle distinction here; while the individual's relation to the other is infinitely asymmetrical, God's relation to the individual is infinitely symmetrical—this, Kierkegaard terms Christianity's "like for like, eternity's like for like."[25]

The like for like has an echoic structure of re/turn, where works of love that are performed in the proper mode re/turn to the individual. Kierkegaard writes that God is the middle term in an agapeic gift economy, one that serves as the qualifying referent to your relations with others:

> the Christian like for like belongs to this world of inwardness. It turns itself away and will turn you away from externality (but without taking you out of the world), will turn you upward and inward. In the Christian sense to love people is to love God, and to love God is to love people—what you do unto people, you do unto God, and therefore what you do unto people, God does unto you.[26]

And here, Kierkegaard proposes a wholly immanent God by suggesting that God works through our love, in the mode of our relations with others: "God is actually himself this like for like, the pure rendition of how you

[18] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 415.
[19] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 327.
[20] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 107.
[21] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 163-164.
[22] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 103.
[23] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 161.
[24] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 161.
[25] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 376.
[26] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 384.

yourself are…God's relation to a human being is at every moment to infinitize what is in that human being at every moment."[27] The agapeic economy, then, has an echoic structure that re/turns the given in the mode of its givenness: "God just repeats everything you say and do to other people; he repeats it with the magnification of infinity."[28] But one must listen in the correct existential mode—must actively live in the properly receptive passivity—in order to hear "eternity's repetition" (WOL 385). God is the vocative echo of our kenotic love, but one can only hear this re/turn when one maintains the revolutionary posture of perpetual beginnings, where the individual incessantly turns inward, toward the other and away from externality. We can recall that in Ovid's tale, Echo repeats the voice of Narcissus, but in such a fragmentary manner that it skews and alters the meaning of the original words. In much the same way, if the individual is "not in a position to listen properly," if the relation is performed in the mode of self-love, then "eternity's repetition" will become fragmented, mis-heard, it will merely be "the noise of life."[29]

To say that Kierkegaard offers an agapeic gift economy as a corrective to the leveling economy of equal exchange and the widespread ills that the latter produces is not without its complications. A lively debate between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion continued specifically concerning the paradox of the gift and its relation to an economy of equal exchange. By drawing out the contours of this debate and its central problematic and by reading (particularly Marion) back into Kierkegaard, we can fully appreciate the extent to which Kierkegaard employs a philosophy of the gift. Moreover, Kierkegaard's corrective already works with and through many of the paradoxes only later identified by Marion. Though Marion's analysis is conducted phenomenologically, whereas Kierkegaard's is existential, Kierkegaard offers the same method of overcoming the gift's paradoxical reversion to exchange: the reduction to pure givenness.

The Paradox of the Gift

The paradoxical nature of the gift that so concerned Derrida and Marion consisted in the idea that, in the process of its actualization or appearance, the gift necessarily reverts to its contrary: exchange. Marion's intention is to attempt to think the gift outside of "this horizon of exchange and economy,"[30] but for Derrida, this is impossible. Inevitably, it seems, the moment the gift appears, the moment it is received as a gift, it enters into an economy of exchange, thus abolishing its status as gift. Derrida explains: "as soon as the donee knows it is a gift, he already thanks the donator, and cancels the gift. As soon as the donator is conscious of giving, he himself thanks himself and again cancels the gift by re-inscribing it into a circle, an economic circle."[31] Which is to say, if the giver of the gift receives self-satisfaction or public esteem in the giving, then "the giver has abolished the

[27] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 384.

[28] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 384.

[29] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 385.

[30] Jean-Luc Marion and Jacques Derrida, "On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, eds. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999), 59.

[31] Marion and Derrida, "On the Gift," 59.

gift in favor of exchange…to become the purchaser of his own esteem."[32] On the other hand, when the recipient, the givee, becomes indebted to the giver, or even when they cancel this debt by giving something back, "the givee erases the gift and establishes an exchange in its place"[33] (GG 103). The paradox of the gift is that the moment it enters into the logic of reciprocity it becomes exchange and is therefore abolished as gift; "it loses its status of being given in givenness, appearing instead in its pure and naked market value." Upon its reception, the gift inevitably becomes "endowed with its own exchange value" and is returned "to the commercial circuit."[34] Once the reception of the gift overshadows its mode of givenness, once it enters into a relation of reciprocity, it becomes an abstraction, appearing in its market value, and is returned to the economy of exchange. To abstract from its mode of givenness, then, is to fetishize the gift, to conceal the conditions of the gift's givenness. The paradox of the gift, then, is this: "either the gift appears as actual but disappears as gift" by entering the economy of an exchange, "or it remains true to givenness but never appears" as gifted.[35] Marion's corrective, his attempt to extricate the gift from the "horizon of exchange and economy," is carried out by employing the same remedy Kierkegaard offers in *Works of Love*, namely, by reducing the gift to its pure mode of kenotic givenness.

The Reduction to Givenness

The paradox of the gift is not a necessary component of the gift as such, but is rather a consequence of our mode of existential relations, one that is firmly entrenched in the leveling effects of the economy of reciprocal exchange. In the modern public, we give in the mode of "*do ut des* [I give so that you will give]."[36] The earnestly kenotic—or as Marion will say, gracious—gift, on the other hand, is given in a mode of radical asymmetry. Rather than assuming a posture of giving that presupposes or desires an equal exchange, the agapeic gift is given *incognito*, given in a mode of self-sacrifice. Within this mode of relation, "we give *without ceasing* […] without keeping account, *without measure*…*without* a clear consciousness of our giving."[37] The earnestly kenotic gift of love is given "without keeping account" because it seeks no return; it is given "*without ceasing*" because, true to its revolutionary quality, it perpetually returns to its difficult beginnings and is given "*without* a clear consciousness of our giving" insofar as it is not an act among others, but is rather a form of life, an existential mode that is wholly embodied and lived. For Marion, perhaps even more so than for Kierkegaard, this is not simply an ideal, but is a mode of relation and givenness that is observable in concrete experience. Interestingly, though Marion reveals pure givenness by engaging in a three-fold reduction of the gift—each one carried out by Kierkegaard in a similar manner—he does not wholly abandon the natural attitude. Rather, pure givenness is potentially experienced in our everyday relations.

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[32] Jean-Luc Marion, "The Reason of the Gift," in *Givenness and God: Questions of Jean-Luc Marion*, eds. Ian Leask and Eoin Cassidy (New York: Fordham UP, 2005), 103.

[33] Marion, "The Reason of the Gift," 103.

[34] Marion, "The Reason of the Gift," 104.

[35] Marion, "The Reason of the Gift," 104.

[36] Marion, "The Reason of the Gift," 104.

[37] Marion, "The Reason of the Gift," 101.

Marion provides a number of examples where one or more of the components of the gift economy is already bracketed in virtue of the gift's mode of givenness or as a result of the gift giving situation. For example, we can imagine a situation like Robinson Crusoe's, where a gift is received without the givee's (Crusoe's) recognition or knowledge of a giver. In this case the giver is bracketed from the gift economy. We can also consider a charitable or humanitarian gift as one where the givee is bracketed by being unknown to the benefactor. Further, in any situation where one gives a non-objectifiable gift, such as one's love, forgiveness, or time, the gift itself becomes bracketed in virtue of its inability to be possessed or exchanged. And lastly, Marion argues that the phenomenon of fatherhood is essentially a gift that is observably reduced to pure givenness.[38]

We find a parallel series of reductions in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*. First, the kenotic nature of agapeic love is such that, when given in the proper mode, it always already brackets the giver. The self-annihilating posture of "loving sacrificially"[39] or indirectly is one where the giver necessarily removes themselves from the horizon of an economy of equal exchange. We recall that the agapeic gift takes on its full meaning only in "the absence of motive," when it is given without the desire for "recognition or return;" that is, when "the giver is lacking" by becoming bracketed in the very mode of their giving.[40] Secondly, for Kierkegaard, love is neither an object nor a being. Though it can be symbolized, as in the case of a wedding ring, the object is not love itself. Rather, revolutionary love is a lived condition, a qualitative mode of existence and as such cannot be possessed, re/distributed or exchanged in the manner of political economy. He writes: "love…is not any object" and "cannot…become an object."[41] With the kenotic gift "no *thing* is given: when we give time, when we give our life…we give no *thing*," rather, we give our self.[42] This means that "the gift does *not* appear as something [some *thing*] that could shift from one owner to another owner."[43] One's love is not given as one would an object of economic exchange, but as a work of love, and yet this work is not a form of labor, and is therefore not repayable in the form of a wage or material or even symbolic compensation. This, then, is how agapeic love's qualitative mode of givenness always already brackets the gift itself. Lastly, because Kierkegaard's sense of love is radically non-preferential, the givee becomes necessarily bracketed as well. Because "every human being is the neighbor," "to love the neighbor [is] to exist equally for every human being."[44] Here, Kierkegaard emphasizes that the gift is lived; kenotic love, then, is existential and perpetual, and is never a momentary economic exchange. Since the relation to the neighbor is radically asymmetrical, and the gift of love is given non-preferentially, without the expectation or desire for reciprocation, its mode of givenness is one where the givee is essentially bracketed. As Marion puts it, "a gracious gift appears precisely because there is no response."[45] Kierkegaard's kenotic work of love, then, as

[38] See Marion, "The Reason of the Gift," 116-122.

[39] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 269.

[40] Marion, "The Reason of the Gift," 114.

[41] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 265, 182.

[42] Marion and Derrida, "On the Gift," 63.

[43] Marion and Derrida, "On the Gift," 63.

[44] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 85.

[45] Marion and Derrida, "On the Gift," 62.

radically asymmetrical: 1) brackets the giver (being given indirectly, even secretively, without desire for return), 2) brackets the gift (insofar as love is not an object or being), and 3) brackets the givee (by being given non-preferentially). In this way, the work of love is reduced to pure givenness in its existential mode of being given.

The Agapeic Gift and Indirect Communication

Kierkegaard is all too aware of the paradox that Derrida and Marion address, namely, the threat of the gift's reversion to its contrary: the economy of equal exchange. Arguably, it is the very recognition of this threat that determines Kierkegaard's mode of authorship and communication, his desire to bracket himself from his given works. His pseudonymous withdrawal from the reader is a strategic protection against entering into an economic relation. For Kierkegaard, "direct recognizability" ensnares one into a relation of exchange and debt as well as being "specifically characteristic of the idol."[46] By bracketing oneself from the gift relation, one both withdraws from the horizon of economy and guards against becoming an idol or object of faith in the eyes of the givee, the neighbor. For Kierkegaard, love is revolutionary and liberating only when it resists the reversion to a relation of exchange and indebtedness.

He considers the example of a gift relation where one individual loves another in such a way as to aid in the other's liberation, in their capacity to stand alone. For the relation, the gift, to be truly loving, the lover must remain hidden (bracketed), otherwise the other cannot stand alone because they will know of their dependence (debt, claim, obligation) on the lover. He writes: "the true benefaction, therefore, cannot be done in such a way that it is to me that he owes it, because if he comes to know that, then it simply is not the greatest beneficence."[47] By remaining invisible the giver exempts the givee "from all dependence," which is to say, from the relation of exchange.[48] "For if he knows that he has been helped, then in the deepest sense he of course is not the independent one who helps and has helped himself."[49] Indirect communication, the lover's self-bracketing, deceptively facilitates the other's liberation from the economic abstractions of the public. He continues: "if someone *actually* has become his own master through the other's help, it is utterly impossible to see that it is through the other's help, because if I see the other's help, then I indeed see that the person helped has not become his own master."[50] In other words, as soon as the gift enters into the horizon of economic exchange—as when the helped one becomes conscious of a debt owed—it is abolished as gift. "The one who loves," then, must give "in precisely such a way that it looks as if the gift were the recipient's property."[51] Indirect communication serves a revolutionary, anti-idolatrous, and liberating function, that is, "to turn the other person away from [the lover], to turn [the other] inward in order to

[46] Soren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), 136.

[47] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 275.

[48] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 275.

[49] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 275.

[50] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 279.

[51] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 278.

make him free, not in order to draw [the other] to himself."[52] Because this radical unselfishness remains "hidden from the person helped," it is offensive to the world of economic exchange where it cannot be thought, and as such is "a dangerous [art] to practice."[53]

The kenotic gift economy of love, by aiding in the other's extrication from the economy of exchange and entitlement, facilitates a revolution, a turning inward, away from externality, toward the self-relation that is the God-relation. By bracketing economy, pure givenness emerges. Kierkegaard writes:

> the loving one's self-annihilation is really only in order not to hinder the other person's God-relationship, so that all the loving one's help infinitely vanishes in the God-relationship. He works without reward, since he makes himself nothing, and in the moment when there could be any question of the possibility that he still could keep the reward of proud self-consciousness, God enters in, and he is again annihilated, which nonetheless is for him his salvation.[54]

As the lover—"the hidden benefactor…God's co-worker"—withdraws, God appears, that is, the gift in its pure givenness appears.[55] Here, the gift is in no way an object, but is rather a lived mode of self- / other-relation—a revolution that turns away from an economy of equal exchange and towards a mode of intensified asymmetry. By wholly giving oneself (kenosis) indirectly—in a relation of radical inequality—the other is able to stand alone, which is, for each, their "salvation."

With the agapeic gift economy, the other is not the benefactor of the return, though the lover is given something in kind. What we find in Kierkegaard's description is an inversion of the economy of equal exchange, where the more one gives, the greater their debt becomes. By giving love, you receive a greater debt to love. Just as the 'object' of love is love itself, the return is itself the call to love. Insofar as the debt is infinite, the individual can never render or balance the account, and so never enters into a relation of exchange. "Against its will" love has "the appearance of paying an installment on the debt" but "to love is to have incurred an infinite debt."[56] In accordance with the Christian like-for-like, a gift is given back to the one who loves; the gift is given by God, but we recall that the God-relation is a self- / other-relation, and that "God is actually himself this like for like, the pure rendition of how you yourself are," so, in kenotically giving one's self, one receives one's self in re/turn.[57] The kenotic work of love is "that which gains itself only in losing itself," it is the "the gift, which gives itself in abandoning itself."[58] Marion explains:

> In giving these nonobjective gifts [(love, care, time, attention, faith, forgiveness, life)], which elude being either understood or

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[52] Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 142.

[53] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 276-277.

[54] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 278.

[55] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 278-279.

[56] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 187.

[57] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 384.

[58] Marion, "The Reason of the Gift," 125.

> possessed, which supply no gain or assignable return, and which really provide *nothing* (*nothing real*; *ne rem*), I in fact give myself in my most complete selfhood. In giving this *nothing*, I give all that I have, because I am not giving something that I possess apart from myself, but rather that which I am. Hence, the paradox that I give (myself) more, the more I give nothing.[59]

Considering the nature, rigor, and the earnestness that is required to enter into the agapeic gift economy, Kierkegaard acknowledges just how radically revolutionary and offensive it appears to those who still exist wholly within the mode of economic exchange. We can begin to see why Marion, like Kierkegaard, posits the development of the economy of equal exchange as arising out of the agapeic gift-economy itself. This is to say that leveling reciprocity and equal exchange develop as a renunciation or turning away from the agapeic gift economy. One adopts symmetrical exchange in order to turn away from the work of love, to turn away from the radically asymmetrical and humble relation that it requires. Marion writes that, by giving anything other than my entire self, my love, "I am excused from really giving…I pay into an annuity in order to be excused from having to love, and so regain my liberty."[60] We can see why Kierkegaard argues that altering one's economic or social standing is "as nothing." This is but a turning away from the gift. A revolution still immersed within the horizon of an economy of exchange—even as it attempts to rethink the functioning and distributive hierarchy of that system—persists in externality, lacking the relation of religious inwardness that turns one toward the other in a relation of agapeic love. For Kierkegaard, the Marxist revolutionary paradigm is not nearly radical enough, for it still insists on a socio-political relation of equality, while within the horizon of the kenotic love the opposite is the case. "The work of sacrificially giving oneself"[61] is such that "the gift is produced only by provoking…an inequality without end."[62] The gift of love, then, is a relation of reciprocity (from God) without reciprocity (from others). In the Christian like-for-like, we are "gifted (*adonné*) – as those who receive themselves in the reception of the given."[63] Relations of exchange only serve as an avoidance of the responsibility and risk of relating to others and to one's self asymmetrically in the mode of kenotic givenness where gifting is the gift itself. In the horizon of economic exchange, on the other hand, the gift is reception itself, entitlement, envy, to be inscribed within a circle where your claim on others is infinite rather than the reverse. Now that we have articulated Kierkegaard's notion of the agapeic gift economy in contrast to the economy of exchange, we can better understand his claim that the leveling effects of the public sphere can be corrected by a revolutionary re/turn to religious inwardness and the mode of givenness that it implies.

Agapeic Inequality and Justice

Those in the public mode of equality relate to one another within the horizon of an economy of exchange; even justice is conceived within this

[59] Marion, "The Reason of the Gift," 115.

[60] Marion, "The Reason of the Gift," 115.

[61] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 265.

[62] Marion, "The Reason of the Gift," 124.

[63] Marion, "The Reason of the Gift," 122.

horizon. Those within the agapeic gift economy, on the other hand, relate to one another outside of this horizon, in the mode of pure givenness. While relations of exchange are performed in the mode of leveling reciprocity (the "*do ut des* [I give so that you will give]"), the mode of givenness proper to the gift economy is one of kenotic, indirect asymmetry. For Kierkegaard, the former is instantiated as an avoidance of the latter, so in order to remedy the ills of exchange, one must perpetually re/turn to the difficult beginnings of that first thought of God, agapeic givenness. An economy of exchange and the "abstract idea of wealth" are characterized by their aim to establish "perfectly determinate" and "fixed relations" among their terms, that is, among individuals as well as commodities.[64] This means that leveling abstraction is componential of the economy of exchange and the fetishization of the gift of love, of relations that originally appear in the modality of pure givenness. Individuals and their relations are abstracted and are met strictly in terms of their exchange value. Marion explains that "commerce allows the exchange of goods only by fixing a measure of equality between objects of value."[65] Within the reciprocal posture of the modern public, individuals relate to others and to themselves as to so many objects of value, and because the exchange "economy as such consists in restoring equality between the terms of exchange," leveling abstraction is the necessary outcome.[66] Kenotic love, on the other hand, consists in restoring inequality and asymmetry, where one gives all for nothing. And yet, this inequality is, at the same time, a kind of radical equality insofar as the distinction between 'mine' and 'yours' is abolished, requiring a wholly non-economic, non-distributive thinking. The abolition of 'mine' and 'yours' means that the revolution of love does not preserve a form of distributive justice as such, for this would still be thought within the horizon of an economy of exchange.

For Kierkegaard, the modern conception of justice is wholly thought within the leveling abstractions of exchange and the existential modes of entitlement and envy that it encourages. This is not to say that he fails to recognize the gross societal inequalities that exist, rather he proposes a radically revolutionary corrective to remedying economic disparities, one that exceeds the exigencies of Honneth and Fraser's redistribution and Rawls's call for strict egalitarianism.[67] Kierkegaard explains that "justice is identified by its giving each his own…and punishes if anyone refuses to make any distinction between *mine* and *yours*."[68] But, with relations that persist in the mode of kenotic love, which is self-annihilating and asymmetrical, "*there are no mine and yours*" for "'mine' *and* 'yours' *are only relational specifications of* 'one's own'."[69] The distinction then, is a product of the mutual self-love that modernity seeks to protect. In securing the other's rights, one hopes merely to establish the security of one's own. The gift of distributive justice, for Kierkegaard, is no gift at all insofar as it is given in the mode of self-love, within the logic of exchange. In accordance with the economy of exchange, justice attempts to maintain a leveling equalization

[64] Marion, "The Reason of the Gift," 106.

[65] Marion, "The Reason of the Gift," 107.

[66] Marion, "The Reason of the Gift," 108.

[67] See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1971); Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?: A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Verso, 2003).

[68] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 265.

[69] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 265.

of individuals, but as conducted in the mode of self-service, it despairs. "Justice tries in vain to secure for each person his own; it cannot maintain the distinction between *mine* and *yours*; in confusion it cannot keep the balance and therefore throws away the scales—it despairs!"[70] Similarly, in Kierkegaard's view, any Marxist revolution will fail to remedy the leveling effects of modernity because, within this form of opposing the established order, 'mine' and 'yours' are merely exchanged, whereby they communally become *ours*. "But *ours,*" Kierkegaard explains, "is for the community exactly the same as *mine* is for the solitary one."[71] Thus *ours* is merely formed by "the joined, the exchanged *yours* and *mine*," from which distinctions "no union can be formed."[72] Therefore, "an exchange by no means abolishes the distinction '*mine* and *yours*,' because that for which I exchange myself then becomes mine again."[73] Mineness is not abolished here, as in the kenotic relation where "the person who loses his soul will gain it."[74]

Since "'*mine* and *yours*' is an antithetical relation," if you eliminate one, the other disappears as well. Therefore, if you take away the distinction *mine*, then you are left with "the self-sacrificing, the self-denying-in-all-things, the true love."[75] Kierkegaard writes:

> The one who truly loves…knows nothing about the claims of strict law or of justice, not even the claims of equity; neither does he know anything about an exchange…neither does he know about community as friendship does, which knows how to watch out whether like is given for like, so that the friendship can be maintained…No, the one who truly loves knows how to do only one thing: how to…give everything away without getting the least in return."[76]

The absolute kenotic gift mustn't be misconstrued though, it is not the monkish renunciation of material possessions, for this would be done within the horizon of exchange. Kierkegaard distinguishes here the community that is grounded on the like for like of economic exchange from the community built up from the ground of an agapeic gift economy, where each individual—united in the "unanimity of separation"—is *adonné*, receiving their self by giving in a mode of radically kenotic asymmetry. The agapeic revolution is "the more profound…revolution," because here "justice shudders" as "the distinction '*mine* and *yours*' disappears."[77] The upheavals of this revolutionary mode, though, are not accomplished once and for all, because "the truly loving one, the sacrificing, the self-giving one who loves…continually giv[es] himself.[78]"

Love is an Event

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[70] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 265.

[71] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 266.

[72] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 267.

[73] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 267.

[74] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 268.

[75] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 267-268.

[76] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 269.

[77] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 266.

[78] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 268.

Kierkegaard contends that "love…is an event," but as an event, a singularity, the gift cannot be repeated; and yet, to be perpetually revolutionary, to re/turn to its beginnings, the gift must be infinitely repeated.[79] Paradoxically, the event harbors the necessity of its repetition. Derrida explains: "the repetition is part of the singularity. That is what makes the event…so difficult to describe, because it is at the same time absolutely singular and unique while carrying in itself the promise of repetition."[80] But, it must be emphasized that the repetition is never "an identical act."[81] Each work of love, then, is a singularity, an event, unique, and as such cannot be repeated, cannot be returned, and therefore cannot enter into the circle of economic exchange. Therefore, in the Christian like for like, God does not return the gift as such, but rather its mode of givenness. Because it is not an object or a being but rather an event, the gift is returned as it appeared, purely in the mode of its givenness. Further, since "love…is a revolution from the ground up," taken up again at each moment, this means that it is not a regime change or a hostile takeover; it is not a *coup d'etat* accomplished once and for all.[82] Therefore, to love in a revolutionary mode, one must "occupy love incessantly in action."[83] One occupies love by earnestly and rigorously living the corrective at each moment, existing in a mode where one relates to oneself and to others, not within the logic of economic exchange, but in the radically asymmetrical, kenotic posture of the agapeic gift economy. For Kierkegaard, this is the revolutionary turn that will correct the leveling effects of modernity by extricating each single individual from the horizon of an economy of equal exchange.

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The characteristically lyrical quality of Kierkegaard's social theory seemingly leaves it open to complaints that it is too naïve, figurative, and lacking a focus on the kind of concrete praxis that is required to accomplish social change. However, a line of development can be traced from Kierkegaard's thoughts on the relation of economy, religion, and revolution to a spectrum of current religiously-oriented philosophies of liberation that foreground praxis. As Cornel West puts it, "justice is what love looks like in public." This is a line of inquiry where much is left to be said. One is also struck and delighted by the degree to which Kierkegaard anticipates the philosophy of the gift that will later be taken up most famously by Marcel Mauss and later by Bataille, Derrida, and Marion, among so many others. Indeed, following Derrida's work on the gift, a small interdisciplinary sub-field emerged that has continued to further investigate the topic. Here, too, it appears that a direction in scholarship remains open to further exploration.

[79] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 265.

[80] Marion and Derrida, "On the Gift," 67.

[81] Marion and Derrida, "On the Gift," 68.

[82] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 266.

[83] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 188.