Strangers Make Better Neighbors

Paradoxical Ethics in the Letter to Diognetus

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Søren Kierkegaard once claimed in a thought experiment that one could love their neighbor *without* an actual neighbor to love. Writing in *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard argued that for a person to demonstrate love to neighbor, "the neighbor does not even need to exist. If someone living on a desert island mentally conformed to this commandment, by renouncing self-love he could be said to love the neighbor."[1] For Kierkegaard, "the point is not to speak about the neighbor as such but (given Kierkegaard's acknowledgment of a 'proper self-love') to show the importance of renouncing a restrictive self-love."[2] The thought experiment intends to show that a person's internal commitments come before their external acts. Although later readers often maligned Kierkegaard's argument, we will attempt to rehabilitate it partially with an appeal to the ethics of neighborliness as found in the underrepresented second century early Christian text, the Letter to Diognetus.[3]

What makes for a good neighbor? In the ancient world, the answer often depended upon one's internal commitments. In many Mediterranean cultures, hospitality to neighbors and strangers evolved from a need to protect one's own chance at hospitality when found in a foreign land.[4] Although it is common to hear that most ancient cultures had some sort of

[1] SØREN KIERKEGAARD, *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. by HOWARD V. HONG and EDNA H. HONG, Kierkegaard's Writings 16 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 21.
[2] M. JAMIE FERREIRA, *Love's Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard's Works of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 35.
[3] On the dating of the text, see for example PAUL FOSTER, "The *Epistle to Diognetus*," *Expository Times* 118 (2007): 162–68, 164.
[4] Greeks granted hospitality to strangers and beggars so as to honor ZEUS; see HOMER, *Od*. 1.120–24, 3.490, 6.207–10, 7.159–65, 14.55–59, 284; cf. 2 Macc 6:2, where Zeus is Διὸς Ξενίου, the "god of strangers."

golden rule,[5] more often than not actual instances seem to be built on "reciprocal exchange."[6] For example, Aristotle wrote that it is "nobler to do good to friends than to *strangers*" (κάλλιον δ᾽ εὖ ποιεῖν φίλους *ὀθνείων*).[7] Unlike strangers, who may or may not offer value, friends offer value to the one who makes them their friend. Aristotle rooted the ethical imperative for friendship within a person's own feelings about themselves.[8] Thus, for Aristotle, self-love surpasses all other love, and a "self-directed attitude has a certain kind of priority over the corresponding other-directed attitude."[9] While many ancient cultures extolled the value of hospitality and friendship, the specific call of biblical literature to love neighbors ahead of loving self tends to run counter to the morals accepted in many of these cultures.[10]

For Christian ethics, the concept of neighborliness begins in the law of Moses. The ultimate assertion of the ethical way to relate to others is to love one's neighbor as oneself (Lev 19:18; cf. Matt 19:19, 22:39, Did. 1.2).[11] Here the law often uses "neighbor" as an ethical device to explain the relationship between any two people. For example, if someone takes the cloak of a neighbor, they must return the cloak before the end of the day (Exod 22:26). In this scenario, a neighbor is someone presumably known to the cloak-taker, as well as someone whom the person has reason to care for and support (Ps 101:5, Prov 3:29). Still, "neighbor" is an ambiguous concept that could cover many different types of people depending on context—except the one type of person "neighbor" does not seem to include is a "stranger." As concepts, "stranger" and "neighbor" do not share similar semantic space: One suggests "distance" or "foreignness" while the other suggests "proximity" or "closeness." In fact, they seem mutually exclusive: A stranger cannot be a neighbor, and a neighbor is not a stranger. If a brigand from a foreign tribe came and took the cloak, the cloak-taker in this context is a stranger not a neighbor. A person would rightfully be more concerned if a stranger took their cloak than a neighbor (cf. Isa 1:7, Ezek 11:9, 28:7, Obad 11, Sir 11:34).[12] Even as biblical literature focuses on loving one's neighbor, it also exhorts the people of God to love strangers. Strangers seem to occupy an important subset of neighborliness, mostly because the people of God themselves were once strangers in a strange land (Deut 10:19; cf. Jer 22:3, Zech 7:10). The

[5] WILLIAM J. PRIOR, *Virtue and Knowledge: An Introduction to Ancient Greek Ethics* (Oxford: Routledge, 1991), 213.
[6] For example, friendship, see GEORGES MASSINELLI, *For Your Sake He Became Poor: Ideology and Practice of Gift Exchange between Early Christian Groups*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 251 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 123, where he references Xenophon, *Mem*. 2.3.13.
[7] ARISTOTLE, *Eth. nic.* 1169b12 (Apostle). See also *Eth. nic.* 1165b35; and MICHAEL PAKALUK, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 14.
[8] ARISTOTLE, *Eth. nic*. 1166a1–35.
[9] RICHARD KRAUT, *Aristotle on the Human Good* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 131–32. Of course, Augustine famously upheld the value of self-love, though in a different key than Aristotle; for complete discussion, see OLIVER O'DONOVAN, *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).
[10] And common sense, as per KIERKEGAARD, *Works of Love*, 24.
[11] This assertion lacks the utilitarian flavor of Aristotelian ethics, see Arius Didymus, *Epit. Eth. per*. 143.5; as cited in ARISTOTLE, *The Great Ethics of Aristotle*, trans. and comments by PETER L. P. SIMPSON (London: Routledge, 2014), 99.
[12] This is why ethical attitudes often suggest there are common scenarios where it is acceptable to "harm" a stranger but not a neighbor; for example, Tony Manela, "Obligations of Gratitude and Correlative Rights," in *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*, vol. 5 (ed. by MARK TIMMONS; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 151–70, 155; and cf. Sir 8:18, 29:27, Jdt 9:2.

torah calls for an additional ethical relationship in that one is also to love strangers as oneself (Lev 19:34). The wording is "striking," in that "*loving the stranger is presented as a significant aspect of loving one's neighbor as oneself.*"[13] In summary, the people of God are to love their neighbors, which includes strangers when they share neighborly proximity.[14]

Not only are the people of God to love strangers as a neighbor, strangers may also act as neighbors, even if that idea seems counter to reason. Jesus articulates this perfectly with the example of the Samaritan who cares for a man he finds wounded from a bandit attack (Luke 10:30–37). In the parable, Jesus gives no description of the man other than he was journeying in Judea and was beaten badly by brigands. In contrast, Jesus identifies the man's savior as a Samaritan. Explicit is the point that the Samaritan, not the other characters, is the neighbor; implicit is the assumption that Samaritans are strangers to the people of Judea (cf. Matt 10:5; Luke 17:18; John 4:9). For the original hearers of Jesus' parable, a Samaritan was a maligned foreigner from whom neighborliness was not expected.[15] What is more, even as the law of Moses calls on neighbors (the people of God) to love the stranger, Jesus flips this by showing a stranger who loves a neighbor (to the people of God).[16] Even though a stranger is not naturally a neighbor, the stranger in Jesus' parable made for a *better* neighbor than the man's actual neighbors. These examples demonstrate that there is a paradoxical (contrary to reason) ethic between neighbor and stranger.[17]

Although it is contrary to reason that a stranger could make a better neighbor than an actual neighbor, there is an implicit argument for this on a significantly grander scale that arises from the mid- to late-2nd century apologetic tract, the Letter to Diognetus. This tract may be from one of the earliest extant apologists, and it provides insight into one aspect of early Christianity: How Christians are to live with others.[18] Christians were neither Greek (Ἕλλην) nor Judean (Ἰουδαῖος) in their lifestyles (Diogn. 1). Yet many people clung to old assumptions and erroneous ideas about Christians (Diogn. 2.1). The letter clarifies that Christians neither live with special reference to idols (Diogn. 2.1–10) nor engage in superstitious behavior that

[13] DAVID I. SMITH and BARBARA CARVILL, *The Gift of the Stranger: Faith, Hospitality, and Foreign Language Learning* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 12.
[14] In this context, "stranger" does not seem to include brigand or "hostile stranger," only strangers who acknowledge some need (cf. Lev 19:10, Deut 10:18, 1 Tim 5:10; Justin, *1 Apol.* 67; plus, the use of προσήλυτος to translate/interpret גר in certain places in the LXX; and of course, no mention of the attackers in Luke 10:30–37), or perhaps better defined as "resident alien."
[15] RUBEN ZIMMERMANN, *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus: Methods and Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 99, 115.
[16] J. PHILIP WOGAMAN, *Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 11.
[17] Here I do not mean "paradox" in sense of the rhetorical figure used in the ancient world, but in the more general sense of "mind-boggling"; see DOUGLAS ESTES, "The Receiver's Paradox: Agency and Essence in John 13:20," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, forthcoming. Kierkegaard also recognized the paradoxical nature of Christian love; noted in SANDRA SULLIVAN-DUNBAR, *Human Dependency and Christian Ethics*, New Studies in Christian Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 80.
[18] On the correlation of biblical literature to the letter to Diognetus: "Angesichts der Tatsache, dass ein großer Teil der erhaltenen Literatur der Kirchenväter Exegese ist, kann von einer prägenden Bedeutung der biblischen Narrative und der anthropologischen Grundannahmen der biblischen Texte auf die Entwicklung der christlichen Ethik in der Antike ausgegangen werden"; see ULRICH VOLP, "Thesen zur patristischen Ethik und ihrem Verhältnis zu den biblischen Texten," *Journal of Ethics in Antiquity and Christianity* 1 (2019): 92–93, 92, online: <https://doi.org/10.25784/jeac.v1i0.117>, Stand: 20.11.2021.

obscures who God is (Diogn. 3.1–4.5). In fact, Christians are ordinary people and therefore indistinguishable from anyone else (Diogn. 5.1–2). Even though Christians may look and act like everyone else, their lifestyle is "worthy of admiration and admittedly extraordinary" (Diogn. 5.4, Kleist; θαυμαστὴν καὶ ὁμολογουμένως *παράδοξον*). Then the letter implies why Christians are both ordinary and extraordinary:

> They reside in their respective countries, but only as *aliens*. They take part in everything as citizens and put up with everything as *foreigners*. Every *foreign* land is their home, and every home a *foreign* land (Diogn. 5.5, Kleist).
>
> πατρίδας οἰκοῦσιν ἰδίας, ἀλλ' ὡς *πάροικοι*· μετέχουσι πάντων ὡς πολῖται, καὶ πάνθ' ὑπομένουσιν ὡς *ξένοι*· πᾶσα *ξένη*· πατρίς ἐστιν αὐτῶν, καὶ πᾶσα πατρὶς *ξένη*·.

There are consequences to the Christian's relationship to the world. Because they are strangers, they have different ethics (e.g., Diogn. 5.6–7). They love everyone, even those who persecute them (Diogn. 5.11). In this, the writer of the letter paraphrases Jesus' call to not only love one's neighbor, but also to love one's enemies (Matt 5:43–44). Thus, even though Christians love all people as they would a neighbor, they love people even as they are strangers among those people. Just as the Samaritan was a stranger, but also a neighbor, so too is a Christian a stranger in the world, but also a neighbor to all who live in the world.

Neighbors and strangers are not synonymous concepts; often these ideas are at odds with each other. What complicates this ethical charge is that the people of God are not merely to love strangers as they love themselves, they are to love strangers while they themselves are strangers. This concept originates with God as he forewarns Abram that his descendants will be "*strangers*" (Gen 15:13, גּוֹר, LXX, *πάροικος*) in a land not their own. This is the reason the Torah forbids treating a stranger poorly (Exod 22:21, גֵּר, LXX, προσήλυτος; cf. Exod 23:9) and expects the people of God to love the stranger as oneself (Lev 19:33–34). This idea became an "abiding thread in Israel's self-consciousness."[19] Even as the descendants of Abraham, the Israelites, were strangers in Egypt, so too does Paul argue that the Gentiles were "*strangers* and *aliens*" to Israel (Eph 2:19, *ξένοι* καὶ *πάροικοι*). Two NT texts take this a step further, telling early Christians that they are themselves "*strangers* and *aliens*" (Heb 11:13, *ξένοι* καὶ *παρεπίδημοί*; 1 Pet 2:11, *παροίκους* καὶ *παρεπιδήμους*; cf. 1 Pet 1:17). Early Christians borrowed this figurative language for their own purposes (2 Clem. 5.1, 5). Being strangers and aliens affects the calculus of Christian ethics (1 Pet 2:11–12). Thus, Christian ethics are not simply a case of *neighbor loving neighbor*—as it is often portrayed—but also *stranger loving stranger*.

The apologist behind the letter to Diognetus does not merely note that Christians are strangers in a strange land; the letter creates a mind-body analogy to explain the relationship between the people of God and the rest of the world. Christians are not only strangers; they are like the soul in a body (Diogn. 6.1). Just as the soul inhabits every part of the body, Christians inhabit every part of the world (Diogn. 6.2). Even though the soul inhabits the body, it is not the same as the body; even though Christians inhabit the world, they are not the world (Diogn. 6.3) because they are strangers in the world. Christians try to do what is

[19] CHRISTOPHER J. H. WRIGHT, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2004), 85.

right, but the rest of the world attacks them because of their ethical stances (Diogn 6.5).[20] Yet the soul still loves the body, and Christians still love the people in the world (Diogn. 6.6). The soul is what holds the body together — it is the immortal feature of a mortal existence (Diogn. 6.7–8).[21] Christians are strangers in the world because they are the immortal features "*living as a stranger*" in a mortal existence (Diogn. 6.8; *παροικοῦσιν*).[22]

It is at this point that we round the circle back to Kierkegaard. In his view, the way to perfect love of neighbor comes through a radical rejection of self-love. The more a person ceases to love themselves, the more they can love their neighbors. Certainly, there is truth here. But the writer of the letter to Diognetus is closer. What drives a Christian ethic primarily is not rejection of self but love of God (Deut 6:5; cf. John 5:42, 13:34, 14:15, 15:12). It is the love of God revealed in Christ that changes a Christian's spiritual and ethical orientation: "It was really the Lord of all, the Creator of all, the invisible God Himself, who, of His own free will, from heaven, lodged among men the truth and the holy incomprehensible Word, and firmly established it in their hearts" (Diogn. 7.2, Kleist). Once this truth establishes itself in the heart of a Christian, they are adopted into the family of God (Eph 1:5) and become a stranger in a strange land. Like the Samaritan in Jesus' parable, the faithful Christian travels the world with the opportunity to love their neighbor, even though the people they meet are not their actual neighbor—they are strangers (cf. Diogn 5.12). Christians may "find themselves in the flesh, but do not live according to the flesh" (Diogn. 5.8, Kleist). This ethic is inherently paradoxical, as it is contrary to reason that the stranger will be neighborly to other strangers, so that all might become neighbors. As a result, the more that a person loves God, the more they will love their neighbor as themselves. The more that a person loves God, the stranger they become to the world. And the stranger the person becomes to the world, the more they love God, the more they love others, and the better the neighbor they make.

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[20] This is both similar and dissimilar from Plato's view. On the one hand, the body hinders the soul and its passions lead to war (PLATO, *Phaed.* 66c), but on the other hand, it is the soul that hates the body (Plato, *Phaed.* 65d).
[21] The immortality of the soul was a common, cultural view; for example, PLATO, *Phaed.* 73a.
[22] It is not clear whether the apologist bases the body and soul analogy on an early Christian understanding or whether the apologist bases it on a generic cultural understanding for the benefit of Diognetus. I favor the latter view.

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