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Kierkegaard from the point of view of the political

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Abstract

This article considers Kierkegaard's contribution to our understanding of the political. Building on previous scholarship exploring the social dimensions of Kierkegaard's thought, I argue that for Kierkegaard the modern understanding and practice of politics should be understood as 'despair'. Thus, whilst Kierkegaard's criticisms of politics might have been produced in an ad hoc fashion, this article argues that there is an underlying principle which guides these criticisms: that politics is subordinate to, and must be grounded in, spiritual or religious selfhood. In this way the modern phenomena of democracy, liberalism, the press, and the crowd can all be seen as representative of a form of community which falls far short of the potential that human beings can and should achieve. Such a community would see individuals recognising themselves and each other as spiritual beings, and taking responsibility for themselves and others. That modern politics fails to understand the human being as an essentially spiritual entity related to others through God can only lead us to conclude that, from Kierkegaard's point of view, modern politics suffers from the sickness of despair. Whilst Kierkegaard might be criticised for failing to provide us with a more detailed picture of a polity shaped by the religious contours he promotes, he clearly offers an intriguing and suggestive contribution to our understanding not only of the limitations of politics, but also the relationship between a normative human and political ontology, with the former providing the basis for the latter.

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Introduction

> Surrounded by hordes of men, absorbed in all sorts of secular matters, more and more shrewd about the ways of the world—such a person forgets himself, forgets his name divinely understood, does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too hazardous to be himself and far safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man.[1]

Søren Kierkegaard is often rightly regarded as a Christian thinker whose work is directed at that 'Single Individual' who seeks to be 'an essentially human person in the religious sense'.[2] Earlier scholarship has supposed Kierkegaard's thought to be limited to a concern with the individual, and thus it is argued to have an asocial tone;[3] in contrast, recent scholarship has attempted to demonstrate that Kierkegaard's thought does in fact provide resources for addressing our social existence, and so moves beyond the confines of an asocial religious individualism.[4] In what follows I wish to build upon this later scholarship and consider Kierkegaard from the point of view of the political. Whilst it would be plainly incorrect to claim that Kierkegaard was a political theorist, or even that Kierkegaard provides an *extensive* treatment of political matters, his thought does relate to this aspect of our existence. Previously scholars have approached Kierkegaard's sociality through his themes of levelling, envy and reflection. Drawing on this I wish to focus on the link in Kierkegaard's thought between religious and political selfhood.[5] In particular, this

[1]Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*. (Translated with Introduction and Notes by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980)33 (henceforth simply *Sickness*).

[2]Kierkegaard. *Two Ages*. (Translated with Introduction and Notes by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 96, 33 (henceforth simply *Two Ages*); Kierkegaard. *The Point of View*. (Translated with Introduction and Notes by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) 68–9, 121–33 (henceforth simply *The Point of View*); Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. (Translated with Introduction and Notes by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 'Dedication'.

[3]For examples of such scholars consult; H.R. Niebuhr *Christ and Culture*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1952); S.U. Zuidema. *Kierkegaard*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company; 1960), who writes that 'Kierkegaard is increasingly critical and sceptical of human fellowship and society. His attitude is that of rejection', p. 18; A. MacIntyre. *A Short History of Ethics*. (Great Britain: Macmillan, 1967), where 'Kierkegaard's type of Christianity is in some ways a natural counterpart to his individualism', p. 218; L. Mackey. "The Loss of the World in Kierkegaard's Ethics." *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. J. Thompson. (New York: Anchor Books, 1972), where Mackey claims that Kierkegaard 'means to say that the individual is really isolated from other beings, receiving from them neither support, insistence, opposition, nor allurement', p. 279.

[4]For a selection of such scholarship consult; M. Westphal. *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987); A. Hannay. *Kierkegaard*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1982); R.L. Perkins. Ed. *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Two Ages*. (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1984); *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Corsair Affair*. Ed. R.L. Perkins (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1990); R.L. Perkins. Ed. *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Works of Love*. (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1999); *Kierkegaard: The Self in Society*. Eds. G. Pattison and S. Shakespeare (Great Britain: Macmillan, 1998).

[5]Previously, Michael Plekon has drawn attention to this link in his article 'Moral Accounting: Kierkegaard's Social Theory and Criticism', in *Kierkegaardiana*, Volume XII, 1982, p. 69. Here Plekon also states that 'in the end [Kierkegaard] is both a theologian and a social thinker. I would argue that for

article will argue that there is a direct connection between Kierkegaard's account of religious and political selfhood through the themes of despair, association, and responsibility.[6] It is therefore my claim that in Kierkegaard's thought, the failure to achieve religious selfhood, or the failure to understand ourselves as spiritual beings, mires all other actives under the condition of despair. What is more, just as for Kierkegaard there is a normative state for this spirituality based and relational self, so too is there a corresponding normative condition for the society and community in which this self is to be situated. Therefore, far from eliminating or marginalising the political, it is Kierkegaard's concern with religious selfhood that opens up the possibility of an account of the political. Indeed, it is clear from Kierkegaard's writings that his attacks on the politics of his day were motivated from a religious platform. In Kierkegaard's thought, the realisation of genuine community presupposes the attainment of selfhood. Thus, it is by considering Kierkegaard from this perspective that we are guided towards a link between a religious ontology and our understanding of the possibilities of the political.

In order to begin this task, and in order to make sense of Kierkegaard's contribution to the political, we must recognise that his account is set against a wider historical backdrop. In this respect many of Kierkegaard's criticisms of the society and politics that he saw around him are not so different from those of his contemporaries and even predecessors. In some ways Kierkegaard was less well-placed than many of his contemporaries to observe and comment upon the effects of what were to become mass democracies. Located in Copenhagen, Kierkegaard found himself outside the major centres of European thought, and marginal to Europe's economic, social and political development. Undoubtedly Denmark went through some major social and political changes during Kierkegaard's lifetime. However, whilst there was a general shift in Copenhagen towards a liberal-bourgeois society, and whilst the absolute monarchy was transformed into a constitutional monarchy with a representative assembly seeing nearly all men franchised, it remains the case that much of Denmark was essentially rural and feudal in outlook.[7]

(*footnote continued*)
him the roles were inseparable', p. 80. In this article I take up this line of thought, and develop it not only along social, but also along explicitly *political* lines.

[6]Louis Dupré has also treated this connection, but from a different angle. In his "*The Sickness unto Death*: Critique of the Modern Age". *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Sickness Unto Death*: Ed. R.L. Perkins (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987), Dupré focuses on the relationship between 'despair' and 'sin'. There Dupré draws out Kierkegaard's 'emphasis upon the individual self [which] is new in a manner in which only a thinker of the modern epoch could have conceived', p. 99. Here I focus to a greater extent not only on modern politics as *being* a form of despair (that is a misrelation of the self), but also on the problems that this creates for the authenticity of individuals in association.

[7]B. Kirmmse, *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) 9–76, deals with these changes in detail between 1820 and 1850; compare also B. Kirmmse "'But I am almost never understood…' Or, Who Killed Søren Kierkegaard?" *Kierkegaard: The Self in Society*. Eds. G. Pattison and S. Shakespeare. pp. 16–7; W. Lowrie, *A Short Life of Kierkegaard*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970) 3–16; As a general summary of these conditions Nerina Jansen provides an useful account in "The Individual Verses the Public: A Key to Kierkegaard's Views of the Daily Press". In: R.L. Perkins, *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Corsair Affair*, pp. 4–6.

Given these observations it might seem strange to probe Kierkegaard for a critique of modern politics that diverges significantly from that of his contemporaries. Indeed, on first glance Kierkegaard's explicit criticisms of politics are not so different from others of this time. Like Marx, Kierkegaard was ambivalent about the bourgeois society in which he lived. He both deplores modern developments and sees in them hope for the future.[8] Again, like others of his time, such as JS Mill, Kierkegaard has criticisms of the public and especially the press. At one point Kierkegaard asserts that the press attempt to usurp the power of government and to rule in its place.[9] Kierkegaard's attacks on the 'tyranny of the majority' are perhaps more vehement than those of JS Mill. Like JS Mill, Kierkegaard warns of the power and crushing weight of public opinion upon the individual.[10] Both agree that whilst the democratic process has a place in human affairs, weight and force of numbers alone does not, and cannot, guarantee the truth or justice of any given proposition or course of action.[11] In fact, Kierkegaard is sceptical about the ability of people to judge competently in every matter as the daily press 'presupposes'.[12] However, ad hoc though many of his comments are, we should not simply assume that Kierkegaard's political comments do not therefore conform to an unifying principle.[13] What underpins Kierkegaard's criticisms, and what sets him apart from his contemporaries, is that his views are directed by a religious notion of selfhood. It is this that he views as sadly, and even disastrously, lacking in modern society (or following the terminology of *Two Ages*, the 'Present Age'). What is more, whilst responsibility is lacking, the power and influence of the 'mass' or 'Crowd' is clearly growing. It is through this notion of the Crowd, and the kind of person that it both presupposes and perpetuates, that we can get a sense of how Kierkegaard's understanding of religious selfhood enables him to comment upon and criticise not only modern politics, but the political itself. From this point of view, far from offering the possibility of community, individuation and ethical life, modern politics is simply a form of despair.

[8]J.L. Marsh deals with the relationship between Marx and Kierkegaard finding that both share a 'common interest in autonomous individuality, community, and the mutual relationship between the two' In: ''Marx and Kierkegaard on Alienation''. *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Two Ages*, Ed. R.L. Perkins. p. 165. Of course, Marx's general ambivalence towards capitalism is displayed throughout his works. On the one hand he viewed capitalism as both alienating and exploitative; on the other, he also viewed it as revolutionary, and creating the foundations for a general human emancipation. This ambivalence is openly displayed in his energetic and dramatic *Communist Manifesto*.

[9]Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers Volume 4*. (Edited and Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, assisted by Gregor Malantschuk. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1975), Section 4192 (henceforth simply *Journals 4*).

[10]J.S. Mill, *On Liberty* [Chapter 1].

[11]*Journals 3*, Section 2982; *Journals 4* Sections 4199, 4160; see also, Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, p. 106, where the crowd is simply a means of deciding and facilitating group action. Cf. J.S. Mill *On Liberty* [Chapter 2].

[12]*Journals 4*, Section 4119.

[13]Kierkegaard's most sustained account of politics appears in his *A Literary Review* (henceforth referred to as *Two Ages*). Kierkegaard also discusses political matters in his numerous *Journal* entries. Whilst this article will draw on these two sources, it will also employ Kierkegaard's pseudonymous work *The Sickness Unto Death* to develop the relationship between politics and selfhood.

Choosing to become what we are: selfhood and despair

If we are to understand Kierkegaard's criticisms of modern politics we must first turn to his account of the self. This is necessary as it is Kierkegaard's account of the process of achieving and maintaining selfhood which enables him to situate the individual relationally and socially, thus providing the grounds for his criticisms of modern forms of sociality. In rehearsing Kierkegaard's account of selfhood we come to see that his criticisms of modern politics is not simply a reactionary attack on forms of democracy and liberalism. On the contrary, Kierkegaard provides the basis for an alternative form of religious sociality which bases his criticisms of modern politics and the modern individual on a religiously conceived relationship between God, self, and others. Kierkegaard's account of selfhood enables him to achieve this as his formulation of the normative form of selfhood explores the situation of the vast majority: the failed form of selfhood which Kierkegaard characterises as 'despair'.

Whilst the concern with selfhood links Kierkegaard to some of the wider currents of philosophical speculation we can identify three distinctive aspects of selfhood which help to differentiate Kierkegaard's account from that of other thinkers. First, selfhood is not simply a matter for philosophical speculation.[14] For Kierkegaard, selfhood must be understood (or more correctly apprehended) existentially. Second, selfhood must be understood as a *religious* category. That is to say, Kierkegaard situates his notion of the self as a spiritual entity in relation to God. Finally, Kierkegaard understands selfhood not to be a passive phenomena or process, but a task. In Kierkegaard's account, it is the task of every human being to actively attempt to become an individual self. In other words, it is the task of every human being to attempt to stand in correct relation with God. Such a relationship is characterised as faith. It is the failure of the self to relate in the correct way to God (and from this point to others) which is the manifestation of despair.

When considering Kierkegaard's treatment of selfhood and despair we can profit by turning our attention to the account offered by Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus in his book of 1849, *The Sickness Unto Death.*[15] *Sickness* opens with two

[14]We might add that this kind of 'speculation' is *one* of the reasons why Kierkegaard rejects the thought and system of GWF Hegel.

[15]Whilst I recognise that there are special difficulties in dealing with Kierkegaard's signed and pseudonymous authorship, and whilst I would *generally* accept that the pseudonymous works should not be taken as indicative of Kierkegaard's own position (as a *Christian* writer), I think that there is sufficient evidence and arguments in favour of cautiously relaxing these strictures in the instance of *The Sickness Unto Death*. First, there is there evidence that Kierkegaard wrote the piece intending it to be signed but changing his mind at the eleventh hour (cf. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *The Sickness Unto Death*, pp. xviii–xxiii). Second, what Anti-Climacus says about selfhood and despair in this piece chimes with what Kierkegaard has to say about these topics under his own name. Third, it should be remembered that through the pen of Anti-Climacus Kierkegaard is presenting an ideal Christian position. Thus, we can assume that what Anti-Climacus has to say about selfhood and despair represent a Christian position, a position that Kierkegaard would seek to assent to (even if he cannot achieve this ideality). Thus, in this instance, *Sickness* can be treated (cautiously) as akin to Kierkegaard's own position. The complexities of Kierkegaard's relationship to his pseudonyms who explore the ideal Christian are addressed in his *Armed*

deceptively simple statements. They both develop what it means to be a human being. We are told that a human being is *spirit*, and that spirit is *self*. Anti-Climacus then produces what must surely be one of the most notorious formulations in the whole of the Kierkegaardian corpus:

> The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but the relation's relating itself to itself.[16]

However for Anti-Climacus this is not the complete story. He also introduces in this initial passage the notion of 'despair' which he characterises as a 'misrelation'. This misrelation can occur because the self, in relating itself to itself, must have either established itself, or have been established by another. Anti-Climacus claims that in the human case the self has been established by another power, and so in order to avoid misrelation, the self must also relate in the correct way to this other. The other in question is God. Therefore, Anti-Climacus concludes his opening passage by writing:

> The formula that describes the state of self when despair is completely rooted out is this: in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it.[17]

What this formula, and the passages that follow it amount to is the general claim that the self is a synthesis of opposites which is self-relating, but (correctly understood) dependent on its relation to God.[18] If the self is related in the correct way to the 'power that established it' it is truly a self, and this is a relation of faith.[19] If however the self fails to do this it is in despair, or 'sin'. Thus, under the pen of Anti-Climacus, we are offered an account of selfhood which is both existential, religious, and relational. The self is existential and not simply a philosophical category as it is the lived experience of individuals. The self should be understood religiously as it is the *spiritual* aspect of selfhood which makes the individual more than simply physical and psychical and raises the human above the animal. Although

(*footnote continued*)
Neutrality where Kierkegaard writes that he has wanted to 'make clear what is involved in being a Christian, to present the picture of a Christian in all its ideal that is, true form' without provoking 'fanaticism' and whilst recognising that he falls short of the ideal placing trust in God that 'in his mercy he will receive me as a Christian' (*The Point of View*, pp. 129, 132–133, and 136, respectively). For a wider discussion of the problems of Kierkegaard's authorship consult Mark C. Taylor *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975); R. Poole 'The Unknown Kierkegaard: Twentieth-Century Receptions'. *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*. Eds. A. Hannay and G. Marino. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); P Lübcke 'Kierkegaard and Indirect Communication'. *The History of European Ideas* 12: 1 pp. 31–40; John W. Elrod, *Kierkegaard and Christendom*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981) [Chapter 7].

[16] *Sickness*, p. 13.

[17] *Sickness*, p. 14; Cf. p. 49.

[18] Cf. John D. Glenn Jr., 'The Definition of the Self and the Structure of Kierkegaard's Work'. *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Sickness Unto Death*, Ed. R.L. Perkins, p. 5.

[19] *Sickness*, p. 30.

individuals might live their lives *as if* they were conditioned by the circumstances around them, in fact human beings also have freedom.[20] Correctly employed this freedom is what enables humans to make the ethical and more importantly religious choice to live a spiritual existence: that is by relating to God.[21] Finally, selfhood is relational as true selfhood is dependent upon another power which constitutes it. In this respect, the human self can relate to any manner of ideas, ideals, projects or persons.[22] However, for Anti-Climacus, as the human self is dependent on God, the only way to truly become a self is in seeking a relationship with God.[23]

Whilst this picture of selfhood might be normative, it is far from usual. In fact, Anti-Climacus tells us that virtually all individuals fail to achieve selfhood.[24] This failure is the condition of despair.[25] However, simply because it is widespread and springs from the same basic misrelation, we should not assume that despair manifests in an uniform way. In one sense despair must be as individual as the individuals who experience it. Whilst despair is also to be understood in relation to the 'constitutes of the synthesis' of the self (finitude and infinitude, possibility and necessity) ultimately consciousness is 'decisive' in regard to the self.[26] Consciousness increases the subject's awareness of their self (both actual and potential), and thus intensifies their despair. In *Sickness* Anti-Climacus outlines three forms of despair that are 'defined by consciousness': 'The despair that is ignorant of being despair, or the despairing ignorance of having an eternal self' (unconscious despair); 'In despair not to will to be oneself: despair in weakness' (weakness); and 'In despair to will to be oneself: defiance' (defiance).[27]

Anti-Climacus turns first to despair as ignorance. This form of despair amounts to the ignorance of being a self.[28] The individual is neither aware that despair exists (as they do not understand what selfhood means), nor are they aware that they are in despair. In such a situation the individual is conditioned by their surroundings, and especially by other people.[29] As we will see, this form of despair is ubiquitous with the Crowd and modern politics. Whilst this form of despair might not be considered despair at all (as it does not have the qualification of consciousness), Anti-Climacus

[20] *Sickness*, pp. 37–42.

[21] *Sickness*, p. 16; John W. Elrod, *Kierkegaard and Christendom*, p. 140.

[22] *Sickness*, p. 33; *Two Ages*, p. 62.

[23] This is also the theme of some of Kierkegaard's signed works. For example, 'To Need God Is a Human being's Highest Perfection'. *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), and 'On the Occasion of a Confession: Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing'. *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[24] *Sickness*, p. 26.

[25] Cf. George Price, *The Narrow Pass*. (London: Hutchinson of London, 1963) 57.

[26] *Sickness*, p. 29; Cf. also, George J. Stack, *Kierkegaard's Existential Ethics*. (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1977), pp. 167–169; Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1982) 194.

[27] *Sickness*, p. 42.

[28] *Sickness*, pp. 42–47.

[29] *Journals 3*, Section 2999.

points out that the 'ignorance' of despair merely compounds the fact of despair with 'error'.[30] In the second form of despair (weakness) the individual is aware that they can become a self, but despair of becoming that self. The individual wants to take on another identity that would be an *acceptable* self which entails a rejection of the self that the individual currently is, and the self constituted through faith, which the individual *should* be.[31] The final form of despair (defiance) sees the individual both recognising that they are a self, but wanting to take command of their self setting it free from its relation with God. Thus in some sense this is the 'highest' form of despair as it involves the greatest degree of consciousness (the individual is conscious of both being a self, and being in despair), and the greatest degree of defiance (the individual wills to not only be a self, but to the author of their own self, thus usurping the place of God).[32]

However, although these appear to be three different forms of despair, we should note that these forms of despair represent a sliding-scale of despair.[33] As suggested, it would be better to view these forms of despair not as discrete manifestations or types of despair, but as aspects of the basic reality of despair (i.e. the basic misrelation of the self to God). This conclusion is strengthened when we also consider Anti-Climacus's account of the aspects of despair against the wider backdrop of his argument concerning consciousness. Anti-Climacus tells us that despair is intensified by consciousness.[34] Indeed, it is consciousness both of despair, and of being in despair, which intensifies the despair of the individual.[35] In this way there is a dialectical relationship between the forms of despair, which reveal them all to be aspects of the same fundamental misrelation of the self.[36] At the one extreme the individual is neither aware of their self, nor the possibility of despair. However, the individual is still in despair and so adds error to despair.[37] The conscious defiance attributed to the devil is the other extreme of despair. Whilst the two conscious forms of despair (despair in weakness, and despair in defiance)[38] might appear to be totally different, Anti-Climacus notes the similarities between them, and even indicates that they can be viewed as reducible to each other.[39]

[30] *Sickness*, p. 44.

[31] *Sickness*, pp. 47–49, 67–74; cf. also Alistair Hannay. *Kierkegaard and Philosophy*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) 84–85.

[32] Hence, for Anti-Climacus, the devil's despair is 'the most intense despair'. *Sickness*, p. 42.

[33] Cf. Stephen N. Dunning. *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Inwardness*. (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985) 223. See also, Alastair Hannay. *Kierkegaard and Philosophy*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) 76–88. Here Hannay makes a case for despair as defiance as the 'paradigmatic form of despair', p. 88. However, Hannay also notes that the text of *Sickness* claims 'there is no clear cut distinction between the two authentic forms of despair', p. 86.

[34] *Sickness*, p. 42.

[35] *Sickness*, p. 42.

[36] The misrelation is despair over the eternal and oneself. Cf. Stephen N. Dunning. *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Inwardness*, p. 221; Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, pp. 167, 197.

[37] *Sickness*, p. 44.

[38] *Sickness*, pp. 47–66, and pp. 67–73, respectively.

[39] *Sickness*, pp. 14, 20.

However, despite the *conceptual* link there is some ambiguity as to how these aspects relate *existentially* (and we should not loose sight of the fact that despair is not simply a philosophical or theological category, but also the existential condition of most people). The form of their presentation in *Sickness* seems to leave space for two possibilities. Either the aspects manifest independently as philosophical categories and are not *necessarily* related as an existential experience of all individuals; or the aspects can be considered to be stages on a developmental path.[40] This path would bring the individual from the point of unconsciousness of both despair and being in despair, through despair as weakness, to an acute awareness of both despair and of being in despair (defiance). Thus, there is a possible dialectical progression from unconscious despair, through conscious despair as weakness, to conscious despair as defiance. Additionally, both forms of despair are the two extremes of the same dialectical movement. Anti-Climacus tells us that both willing and not willing to be oneself presuppose each other, and are 'relative' to each other. Thus, all forms of despair (as they are lived conditions) involve both a degree of defiance and weakness.[41]

So, whilst despair is a sickness (and thus something which might be cured), it should also be noted that despair is the usual, *but not normative*, condition of the self and the person.[42] Formulated by Anti-Climacus, 'despair' is described as a 'misrelation' but this misrelation *is not* inherent in the human condition (even though its near universality and seeming inevitability might make it appear as such).[43] The misrelation is the obstacle to complete selfhood, not a part of that selfhood.[44] Indeed, as Anti-Climacus himself points out, it is the possibility of the sickness of despair that distinguishes the human from the animal.[45] If humans were not capable of suffering and escaping despair, then it would not be possible to talk of despair as such. Furthermore, to be aware of despair is the Christian's advantage over the natural man.[46] Of course, theologically despair constitutes the prime mortal sin, and so Anti-Climacus is raising the most dire accusation against his reader. Indeed, we should not loose sight of the fact that *Sickness* is directed at Kierkegaard's contemporaries who consider themselves Christians, but do not live by the implications that being a Christian would entail. However, despite being a sinful condition, despair also shows that the individual has the freedom to both turn towards or turn away from God. An individual who is aware of despair is aware that they are a spiritual being in a way that an individual who is unaware of the condition of despair is not. Thus, what despair, or more strictly the *possibility* of despair points

[40]This impression is left after reading the accounts given by Stephen N. Dunning. *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Inwardness*, and George J. Stack. *Kierkegaard's Existential Ethics*.

[41]*Sickness*, p. 49; but cf. also Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, p. 88.

[42]*Sickness*, pp. 22–23, 26.

[43]Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, p. 163.

[44]*Sickness*, p. 16.

[45]*Sickness*, p. 15; a statement which echoes those of Vigilius Haufniensis, *Anxiety*, p. 42.

[46]*Sickness*, p. 15. We shall return to the concept of the 'natural man' shortly.

to is an individual's ability to become a self. As we have noted, Anti-Climacus describes despair as a possibility of the relation of self.[47] Whilst the self might be related to any number of things, it *should* be related to the power which created it. That is to say, the *cause* of spirit: God.[48] The misrelation of despair fails to complete this relation. First through ignorance of both despair and being in despair, then through weakness and/or defiance. As we shall see, for Kierkegaard what is so depressing about modern politics is that it does not even ascend to the 'lower' forms of despair. Modern politics is rarely a conscious defiance of God as the ground of selfhood. Instead, for most it is simply the failure to even recognise that despair is possible.[49]

Before we turn to this analysis, it is important to note two further points. The first is simply to make explicit that in Kierkegaard's account and description of despair it should not be assumed that the word is synonymous with terms such as "sorrow" or "depression". Despair is a misrelation that stands *behind* the experiences of individuals (and is revealed by those experiences).[50] In *Sickness* despair is described as a sickness, but it is a sickness of the self. It is a sickness of how the self relates to God, itself, and inevitably, others. Although we should not attempt to stretch this analogy too far, in some ways despair is akin to suffering from a spiritual delusion. In the most extreme cases of delusional illness the 'patient' does not think that they are experiencing delusions. Indeed such a patient may think that they are experiencing reality as it truly is. Despite their certainty, from the medical point of view they are seriously unwell. Moreover, no stability or fulfilment can ever be achieved whilst the patient is suffering from this condition. It is perfectly possible for an individual to believe themselves to be happy, content, and fulfilled, even though they are truly suffering from despair.[51] Indeed, those who (like the deluded who refuse to accept their delusion) believe themselves to be content are in fact more despairing than those who have discovered and are confronting their despair.[52] Thus, under his own name, Kierkegaard can write:

> Despair is a misrelation in a person's innermost being—no fate or event can penetrate so far and so deep; it can only make manifest that the misrelation—was there.[53]

So, despair is the failure to achieve the correct form of relational selfhood, but the fact that humans are *capable* of despair is grounds for the hope of selfhood, and the indication that it is possible. For Kierkegaard this selfhood is a relation with God, a

[47] Cf. George Price, *The Narrow Pass*. (London: Hutchinson of London, 1963), p. 52; Alastair Hannay. *Kierkegaard* (London and New York: Routledge, 1982), pp. 167, 202.

[48] *Sickness*, pp. 13–14.

[49] Stephen N. Dunning, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Inwardness*, p. 217.

[50] *Works of Love*, p. 40.

[51] *Sickness,* pp. 35, 56.

[52] *Sickness*, p. 25; and thus consciousness playing a crucial part in the intensity and development of despair, *Sickness*, p. 42.

[53] *Works of Love*, p. 40; Cf. *Sickness* where the end of the 'illusion' of not being in despair exposes the despair 'which lay underneath', p. 44.

relation which is expressed as the freedom of becoming. This selfhood must be continuously reaffirmed and is threatened by the ever present *possibility* of despair.[54] Additionally, this relational self must also constitute its relation to God with correct relations with others, and the starting point for this is to recognise the other as a neighbour.[55] In doing so, Kierkegaard means that we must recognise the other as a spiritual self with the capacity to recognise and accept its relationship to God, and the realisation of this in the socio-political sphere as the treating of others as spiritual ends and equals.[56] Until this most basic and foundational of tasks is attended to, Kierkegaard believes all other projects will be mired in despair. It is the tragedy of modern politics that it is dominated by the concerns of natural man, who fails to recognise this.

The inversion of community: natural man and the crowd

> Man is *by nature* an animal-creation. All human effort is therefore in the direction of running together in a herd… The truth is that in the herd one is free from the criterion of the individual and of the ideal.[57]

So far we have outlined Kierkegaard's account of selfhood and the condition of despair. Crucially, we have seen that this account of selfhood is one which recognises that the human parts of the person (physical and psychical) have to be related with the spiritual. The individual achieves selfhood by relating in the correct way to God (faith). Failure to achieve selfhood, that is a misrelation to God, is characterised as despair (sin). Thus, Kierkegaard maintains that the human being has both an animal nature and a divine nature. It is important to recognise that for Kierkegaard the animal nature of man is not something which has to be expunged.[58] Indeed, this is an impossible task. The task of selfhood is the task of relating in the correct way to both the temporal and eternal, human and divine. However, Kierkegaard does not intend this self-realisation to simply be an inward turn. Indeed, the individuation process that selfhood engenders *necessarily* brings the individual into relation with others. Kierkegaard is at pains to point out that inner transformation results in a change in the way in which the individual both views and acts towards others.[59] Others must be viewed as spiritual equals. In making this move Kierkegaard lays the foundations for an account of an authentic sociality, and a critique of the basis of modern politics.

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[54] Thus despair is clearly related to the anxiety (or dread) as explored by Vigilius Haufniensis in *Anxiety*.

[55] *Works of Love*, pp. 40–43, 252–256.

[56] *Works of Love*, p. 255; John W. Elrod. *Kierkegaard and Christendom*, pp. 88–89, 163.

[57] *Journals 3*, Section 2968; see also *Journals 4*, Sections 4183, 4186, 4231, 4234.

[58] For example, compare what Vigilius Haufniensis has to say in *Anxiety*, pp. 43–44, 49, 155, and what Kierkegaard also writes in *Works of Love*, pp. 52–53.

[59] Indeed, it would seem that Kierkegaard was all-too-aware that his category of the 'Single Individual' might lead some to think that he was uninterested in, or even opposed to, sociality, *Works of Love*, p. ix. *Works of Love* itself is an exploration of the duties the Christian owes to others in the form of the neighbour.

In what follows we will re-construct Kierkegaard's account of authentic community, and how this informs his criticisms of the politics and sociality of modernity. Specifically, we will see how Kierkegaard argues that modern politics is dominated not by individuals recognising each other as spiritual equals before God, but by the instincts and rationality of 'natural man'. Just as there is a correct form of selfhood of which despair is a misrelation, so too can we consider Kierkegaard to have a normative view of societal and political relations. Such a normative view would place these relations under the category of spirit: and to deviate from this category must therefore place relations in a condition of despair. Kierkegaard can be understood to contrast a genuine form of edifying community consisting of responsible individuals relating to each other as spiritual equals, to the despairing individuality of modern politics which manifests in the anonymous and levelling force of a self-interested 'herd' or 'the Crowd'.[60]

What then does Kierkegaard have in mind when he talks about community? For Kierkegaard community is certainly more than a simple association. Unsurprisingly, community does not amount to the sum of the relations of *homo economicus* pursuing narrow self-interest or utility. Kierkegaard is looking for something more binding than the accident and temporality of these interests and desires. Nor does community amount to individuals *simply* subscribing to the same idea or procedure. Whilst individuals must share or relate to the same idea in order to form a community, the idea has to be both chosen and unchanging in order for the community to be stable. Thus, community does not exist simply because individuals subscribe to popular or widespread ideas (such as liberalism, democracy, 'humanity', ethical duty, or even 'Christianity').[61] Community can only truly exist because of the nature of the ideas adhered to, and the nature of that adherence. For Kierkegaard, the only 'idea' which can achieve this is that of God, and individuals must relate to God in a spiritual way, and not simply reflectively or passionately. As a result, what is needed, in Kierkegaard's view, is that individuals transcend an understanding of themselves as mere 'natural men' who limit their associations to utility or base it upon the dictates of an earthly or rational ethics. These lights will either lead the individual to empty categories such as the idea of 'humanity' and 'equality' which drains the spirituality of others and the individual's responsibility towards the *actual* individuals that they encounter;[62] or to the hidden self-love which characterise friendship and civic communities.[63]

[60]It is interesting to note here the coloration between Kierkegaard's thought and that of Martin Heidegger. This is especially apparent in *Being and Time*, IV, and where Heidegger discusses 'Everyday Being-one's-Self and the "They"'. It is clear that Heidegger both knew Kierkegaard's work and was influenced by it—a debt that, in the words of Roger Poole, 'should be a matter for a little embarrassment, perhaps', and not simply restricted to the concept of 'Das Man' (Roger Poole in Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino. *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, p. 52).

[61]*Works of Love*, pp. 47–48. Attacks on the established state church of Denmark are a prominent theme of Kierkegaard's later work. The problem for Kierkegaard was of how to reintroduce Christianity to Christendom. *Works of Love*, p. 48; *Journals 3*, Section 2958, Section 2992.

[62]Two Ages, pp. 84, 87–88. 107–108; *Works of Love*, pp. 71–72, 147; *Journals 4*, Section 4131.

[63]*Works of Love*, pp. 53–54; John W. Elrod. *Kierkegaard and Christendom*, pp. 93, 116.

For Kierkegaard, then, in order for true community to exist individuals must first understand and embrace the spiritual task of selfhood. It is this task which enables the individual to understand the true relationship between their temporal and spiritual aspects and how to correctly relate these to God. Selfhood free of any misrelation provides the model for an individual's understanding and relationship with all others.[64] Just as the individual must come to understand that they are both temporal and spiritual, and that they stand before God, so too must they recognise that all others share these characteristics, and the characteristic of being a 'single individual'. Thus it is selfhood which provides the dynamics for a positive ethical-religious basis in a community with others, the foundations of true individuality, and the only possible stable and unchanging foundation for them both: God. To base community on any other foundation is to base it merely in the temporal. Thus, individuals never succeed in overcoming their status as 'natural men' and do not truly become selves even if they achieve a rational morality.[65] Such foundations for community are doomed to failure. They are subject to change, limit human enterprise and communion to the purely earthly, fail to recognise others as spiritual beings, and elevate the temporal to the status of the eternal. As such, they represent a form of misrelation with God: in other words, *despair*.

In some ways then it is possible to say that Kierkegaard's thinking on the possibilities of association chimes with that of such thinkers as Hobbes, Locke and Hume. Kierkegaard agrees that natural man is self-interested, rational and seeks to further his own worldly ends. Where Kierkegaard's thought parts company with this self-interested view of the person is in reversing the conditions for natural man to emerge. First, individuals do not have to remain at the animal level; indeed, it is proper for individuals to attempt to rise above this state. Second, for Kierkegaard the qualities of natural man are most manifest *when man is joined with others*.[66] In the Present Age, Kierkegaard identifies this as being manifest in the phenomena of the Crowd. For Kierkegaard, the Crowd is the anonymous phantom[67] which is created when natural man loses sight of his potential for religious selfhood and herd together in a secular association which is hardly deserving of the name 'community'. The Crowd divert the individual from the task of selfhood by replacing that task with the comforts, dynamics, and 'identity' provided by this form of association. For Kierkegaard the Crowd cannot lead to selfhood or individuation, and for this very reason the Crowd cannot constitute a *community*.[68] In a *Journal* entry Kierkegaard

[64]Cf. *Works of Love*, pp. 62–63, 107.

[65]It is in this way that Kierkegaard would find a Kantian 'kingdom of ends' unacceptable. In such a 'kingdom' individuals respect and recognise each other as *rational* ends, not as *spiritual* ends. As such, they cannot (for Kierkegaard) be true selves, nor can their form normative ethical-religious relations with each other as neighbours (which they are commanded to do as a response to their relationship with God). In this way we can also see how Kierkegaard might object to Judge William's position in *Either/Or*. Whilst the judge implores the aesthete to 'develop in his life the personal, the civic, the religious virtues' (*Either/Or II*, p. 262), he does not sufficiently emphasise the *spiritual* conditions for selfhood, and focuses instead on making the temporal and accidental, 'rational'.

[66]Cf. Westphal. *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society*, p. 44; *Journals 3*, Section 2952.

[67]*Two Ages*, p. 90.

[68]*Journals 3*, Section 2952.

makes this distinction (and the gulf between the moral value of community and Crowd) abundantly clear:

> "Community" is certainly more than a sum, but yet it is truly a sum of ones; the public is nonsense—a sum of negative ones, of ones who are not ones, who become ones through the sum instead of the sum becoming a sum of the ones.[69]

What Kierkegaard's thought displays here is not a hostility towards genuine community, but a disdain towards the Crowd who masquerade as community whilst destroying the very foundations of genuine community.[70] Indeed, genuine community *can* become more than the individuals who compose it; but this also presupposes that individuals exist, and to do so is to realise their selves as spiritual beings. Where this is not the case, and where this becomes the rule (such as in the Present Age), the Crowd takes on the power of an individual without the character or responsibility of an individual. In this regard Kierkegaard likens the Public to a Roman emperor 'suffering from boredom' who is 'more sluggish than he is evil, but negatively domineering, sauntering around looking for variety'.[71] The Crowd does not, therefore, present itself as a 'positive' evil. It is not that it sets up a counter-ideal to selfhood. The Crowd is not only incapable of having ideals (because of the shifting nature of Public opinion) it is also unaware of the notion of selfhood itself.[72] Thus, the Crowd fails to achieve the conscious forms of despair (weakness and defiance) and languishes in the state of despair that Anti-Climacus calls despair in ignorance.[73]

If the Crowd cannot lead to selfhood, as it does not operate under the category of spirit, neither is it a form of genuine community. The Crowd is at once everyone and no one. Individuals may consider themselves to be a member of the Public but for Kierkegaard this is an empty term. There is no true identity here. The Crowd is simply an abstract 'phantom'. It is essentially characterless and is not capable of true action. It cannot act as its members do not have true identity: as a result the opinion of the Public is fluid and shifting. Indeed, in a strict sense it is not really possible for the Crowd to express or formulate an opinion as there is no common idea that unites the individuals within the Crowd. Without the fixed point of this idea individuals cannot relate to each other in any meaningful way. And it is this lack of relation that demarcates social and political 'relations' within the Present Age. For Kierkegaard this becomes evident when the Present Age is contrasted to previous ages, especially Antiquity. Kierkegaard claims that in previous ages although there was a Crowd its features were fundamentally different to the Crowd in the Present Age (as manifested in the notion of the Public). In Antiquity members of a Crowd remained individuals

[69] *Journals 3*, Section 2952; compare also *Two Ages*, pp. 63 and 91, where Kierkegaard writes that 'the existence of a public creates no situation and no community'.

[70] Cf. Patricia Cutting, "The Levels of Interpersonal Relationships in Kierkegaard's *Two Ages*". *International Kierkegaard Commentary*: Two Ages, Ed. R.L. Perkins. 78, R.L. Perkins, "Kierkegaard's Critique of the Bourgeois State". Inquiry, 27: 212.

[71] *Two Ages*, p. 94.

[72] *Journals 3*, Section 2985, Section 2935.

[73] This is not to say, however, that particular individuals cannot experience the higher forms of despair, but they do so *qua* individuals and not as members of the Crowd.

because they related themselves to the exceptional or great individual. The 'man of excellence stood for them all'.[74] However, in the Present Age people do not stand in relation to either an internal or external ideal. As such, they cannot stand in relation to one another in terms of responsibility, place and purpose. Their only relation is a numerical one.[75]

The responsibility of the single individual

So far, then, we have seen Kierkegaard paint a fairly dour portrait of the modern political subject and the space that is available to the political. For Kierkegaard modern political subjects veer towards a mistaken sociality: a sociality that manifests in a self-interestedness and anonymity which undermines selfhood. Such a sociality does not take the task of selfhood seriously. Indeed, it fails to even recognise that human beings face this task. Therefore, political life is empty because its participants are empty. The Present Age is characterised by individuals who relate neither to an ideal (however misguided), nor to each other. Individuals in the Present Age allow their natural qualities to herd them into the Crowd. Under such conditions, people do not recognise themselves as spiritual beings, and so cannot realise responsibility and genuine community.

So, although the Crowd might be mistaken for a form of community, it is in fact the mirror image of community. In Kierkegaard's thought it is *not* the case that the individual is the opposite of community. In fact, as we have seen, the true opposition occurs between the inter-related notions of the individual and community (on the one hand), and the Crowd and natural man (on the other). In the first instance we find individuals who are truly selves and who dispense their ethical obligations towards others.[76] In the second (the Crowd) we find mere 'natural men' who are concerned only with their own prudence and who avoid and disown their ethical duties. Indeed, they are not capable of true ethical conduct *because* at best they refuse their potential selfhood (although clearly it is more common that they have no conception of their potential selfhood). In one conception of community we find subjects who *cannot* take responsibility as they have no real conception of what it would mean to be a self—let alone a self defined in spiritual terms. Without such a conception a person cannot become aware of how they deviate from faith, and thus take responsibility for this deviation. In the relationships of genuine community individuals share a common notion of ethical responsibility and selfhood. As they take responsibility for themselves and their actions they are able to treat each other

[74] *Two Ages*, p. 85; cf. *Works of Love*, p. 74.

[75] A feature which is also connected to theoretical problems surrounding the 'will' of the 'demos' in democracies. Cf. S.I. Benn and R.S. Peters. *Social Principles and the Democratic State*. (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1959) [Chapter 15].

[76] John W. Elrod. "The Social Dimension of Despair". *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Sickness Unto Death*, Ed. R.L. Perkins, p. 108.

as equal individual ends.[77] This form of community is strengthening and corrective for selfhood.[78] In contrast, the 'association' of the Crowd works in the opposite direction. Under the cover of anonymity individuals join in the destruction of character and the grounds for developing character. In this way the Crowd is a major organ of levelling. In addition, whilst the unifying principle of community is a positive spiritual ideal, the unifying principle of the Crowd is negative. It is the mutual relationship of envy that both characterises the age and binds and motivates the Crowd.[79] Envy takes the form of the selfishness of the individual, and the reproduction of this in his associates.[80] The individual is overwhelmed by the possibilities that reflection opens to him, but does not act upon them. It is these trapped possibilities that become "noxious" to him.[81] Thus envy prevents the individual from relating to and admiring greatness. It also drives the individual to the further step of denigrating excellence:

> Envy in the process of *establishing* itself takes the form of *levelling*, and whereas a passionate age *accelerates, raises up and overthrows, elevates and debases*, a reflective apathetic age does the opposite, it *stifles and impedes, it levels*.[82]

It is from this perspective that we can also understand how, for Kierkegaard, the Crowd forms an ideational counterpoint to use of 'the Single Individual'.[83] The notion of the Crowd has a dual function. The first is that Kierkegaard uses the concept to help define and differentiate the individual and their place in the Present Age. The second is that Kierkegaard uses the term for rhetorical purposes. Kierkegaard's frequent contrasting of the term 'Crowd' to that of 'the Single Individual' is intended to draw the reader into an existential recognition and confrontation with their own position in the Present Age. For rhetorical purposes the division between the Crowd and 'the Single Individual' had to be drawn as starkly as Kierkegaard's pen would allow. Kierkegaard's aim was to bring 'the Single Individual' to a realisation of their own individuality and thus shake them of the delusions an empty comfort afforded by the animalistic and 'democratic' Crowd.[84]

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[77] John W. Elrod. "The Social Dimension of Despair". *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Sickness Unto*. Ed. R.L. Perkins. Death, p. 114.

[78] *Works of Love*, pp. 59–60; John W. Elrod. *Kierkegaard and Christendom*, pp. 148, 291.

[79] *Journals 4*, Section 4127, where the Danish are envious towards those who rule; Section 4147, where Denmark is 'ungovernable' because of envy; Section 4180, where 'public life is carried on in a lurching between *envy* and *pity*, but no pathos, no enthusiasm for greatness, no gratitude'.; cf. also John W. Elrod. *Kierkegaard and Christendom*, p. 110.

[80] *Two Ages* p. 81; see also Perkins. "Envy as Personal Phenomenon and as Politics". *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Two Ages*. Ed. R.L. Perkins, pp. 107–132.

[81] *Two Ages*, p. 82.

[82] *Two Ages*, p. 84 (emphasis as in original); compare also *Journals 1*, Section 794, to see how in fact envy *might* be employed against itself to produce extraordinariness.

[83] Louis Dupré, "The Sickness unto Death: Critique of the Modern Age". *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Sickness Unto Death* Ed. R.L. Perkins, p. 90.

[84] Cf. Best and Kellner who write that 'Kierkegaard sees mass democracy as a great levelling force that… reduces individuals to a herdlike, anonymous existence'. *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Corsair Affair*. Ed. R.L. Perkins, pp. 36–37.

Kierkegaard uses the Crowd to describe a general characteristic of association in modernity and a tendency in politics toward the *authority of numbers*.[85] However, Kierkegaard also uses the notion for a wider analysis of the mechanisms that thwart the development of the kind of authentic selfhood that he seeks to promote. The Crowd is linked to reflection insofar as the Crowd is also a form of avoiding selfhood through the diluting and even dissolving of ethical responsibility.[86] Kierkegaard points out that whilst there is no problem with reflection *per se*, the proper use of reflection is to culminate in action.[87] The danger is that reflection leads to an endless cycle of argument and counter-argument, and weakens the individual through lack of commitment. The Crowd serves the purpose of 'hiding' the individual not only from others but also *their own selves*.[88] In such a state-of-affairs the individual hides their relation to their responsibility by dissolving it in the number of the Crowd. Here individuals are reduced to the lowest form of human existence; the herd-like associations of natural man. However, it is important to note that the phenomena of the Crowd differs from the traps of languid reflection insofar as the Crowd is a part of (and an expression of) an age that is devoid of true passion, and yet is prone to 'flaring up in superficial, short-lived enthusiasm and prudentially relaxing in indolence'.[89]

If we are to further appreciate the role that the Crowd plays in relation to the Single Individual in Kierkegaard's thought, and especially his hostility towards it, it is also necessary to remind ourselves of Kierkegaard's models. Apart from his father from whom Kierkegaard appears to have "inherited" his melancholic and somewhat foreboding view of a suffering Christianity, two historical figures loom large. The first is that of Jesus Christ; the second is Socrates. For the purposes of illustration, let us focus on Christ. We would of course expect Christ to appear in a *Who's Who* of Kierkegaard's influences. The question is *in what way is Christ a model for Kierkegaard?* The answer to this question has two parts. The first is that Christ provides a model for the true Christian way of life. It is a way of life that has a spiritual task (the actualisation of selfhood) and earthly tasks (attention and care towards the other in the form of the neighbour). Christ forms a model of what

[85] *The Point of View*, pp. 121–124, 126.

[86] *Sickness*, pp. 33–34; "The Single Individual". *The Point of View*, p. 107; cf. Patricia Cutting's observations that for Kierkegaard 'it is the abstract crowd… that leaps in and takes over the responsibilities and the choices of the members of society'. *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Two Ages*. Ed. R.L. Perkins, p. 78; And Merlod Westphal in *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society*, p. 50, where the Crowd has freed itself from 'a framework for which the distinction between good and evil, right and wrong, is essential to decision and action.'

[87] Cf. J.L. Marsh, "Marx and Kierkegaard on Alienation". *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Two Ages*, Ed. R.L. Perkins, p. 169; Barrett's, "Kierkegaard's Two Ages: An Immediate Stage on the Way to the Religious Life". *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Two Ages*. Ed. R.L. Perkins, pp. 53–71; Dru 1962: 18; and Kierkegaard. *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers Volume 3*. (Edited and Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, assisted by Gregor Malantschuk, Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1975), Sections 3704, 3711.

[88] *Sickness*, pp. 35, 46; *Journals 3*, Section 3001. See also, John W. Elrod. "The Social Dimension of Despair". *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Sickness Unto Death*. Ed. R.L. Perkins, p. 108.

[89] *Two Ages*, p. 68.

Christians can and *should* be.[90] The second sense in which Christ is a model for Kierkegaard is the example of the historical events of his life. This aspect is crucial for Kierkegaard's understanding of the Crowd as the Crowd's reaction to Christ is as true for Kierkegaard's contemporaries as it was for the contemporaries of Jesus. Kierkegaard's vision of Christ is not the one of the triumphant glory of the Risen Christ who heralds the imminent victory of Christendom. Repeatedly Kierkegaard emphasises the suffering Christ, the Christ who endures and expects public ridicule. Kierkegaard draws attention to the role of the Crowd in abusing, denying and crucifying Christ as Truth. In a *Journal* note Kierkegaard also draws attention to the role of the Crowd in the freeing of Barrabas.[91] In choosing Barrabas the Crowd chose the earthly, sinful and untruthful over what was quite literally *the* spiritual truth. For Kierkegaard, Christ's life is a model of what the contemporary Christian should expect. It is also a reminder that it is the Crowd who are the greatest threat to the truth, and who (given the choice) deny the truth and turn to the world.

Thus, the responsible individual has a personal relationship with God and the truth. They recognise what they both should be, and are aware that they fall short of this ideal. They are therefore capable of forming a responsibility that is responsive to the needs of their spiritual equals or neighbours. The Christian must make a stand that Christianity exists, even if they fall short of the ideal. To make such a stand is not to please, side with, or be followed by the Crowd, but to act in accordance with inwardness.[92]

Central, then, to Kierkegaard's account of the political are the notions of the responsible individual and the 'herd', 'mass' or 'Crowd'. Without a conception of the possibilities of spiritual selfhood there can be no responsibility. That responsibility has evaporated are observations first articulated by Kierkegaard under the pens of the authors of *Either/Or*.[93] Here the aesthete A writes that 'our age is sufficiently depressed to know that there is something called responsibility, and that it means something. Therefore, although everyone wants to rule, no one wants to have responsibility'.[94] The concern is repeated again from the pen of Judge William where he asserts that each man is given the task of creating and accepting himself as 'The self that is the objective [which] is not only a personal self but a social, civic self'[95]. However, Kierkegaard's later signed works imply that those in the Present Age do not even recognise the need for responsibility, and so act irresponsibly. Kierkegaard views the developments of his own age as both arresting and aiding the development

[90] *Armed Neutrality* in *The Point of View*, p. 131.

[91] *Journals 3*, Sections 2930, 2931.

[92] *Armed Neutrality* in *The Point of View*, pp. 130–134.

[93] It is not my intention to conflate the positions of these two pseudonyms with that of Kierkegaard, but merely to recognise this point of correspondence between them. On the deficiencies of the authors of *Either/Or* on the notion of the 'self' Cf. John W. Elrod. *Kierkegaard and Christendom*, pp. 86–88, 156.

[94] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or Part I*. (Translated with Introduction and Notes by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987) 142 (henceforth simply *Either/Or Part I*).

[95] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or Part II*. (Translated with Introduction and Notes by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987) 262 (henceforth simply *Either/Or Part II*).

of responsibility. On the one hand Kierkegaard laments the atomisation of modern society which displaces individuals and separates them from a recognition of their own import and responsibility; on the other hand, this process of atomisation could be employed to help individuals realise that they are above all else an individual, and not simply a member of a mass or public with no importance of their own.[96] Again this echoes the reflections of the authors of *Either/Or*, especially the young aesthete who writes 'numerous associations, therefore, demonstrate the disintegration of the age and themselves contribute to speeding it up; they are the infusiora in the organism of the state and indicate it has disintegrated'[97]. It is as a reaction against this disintegration that we can understand some of Kierkegaard's more conservative appeals to hierarchy. Clearly, hierarchy is *one* way of preserving distinction, individuality and responsibility. However, the claim that Kierkegaard supports some forms of social hierarchy, is a different class of claim to simply claiming that Kierkegaard supports a specific hierarchy, or is conservative per se.[98] Kierkegaard's own society is the occasion for his comments, but his comments are guided by a wider framework. This makes it possible for Kierkegaard to have a potentially radical message that often appears couched in reactionary terms.

The perils of the Present Age

Whilst for Kierkegaard there is a link between the inward and outward relations of a normative spiritual self, clearly modern politics, and especially mass democracy, fail to reflect this task of responsibility, truth and selfhood in any way. The characteristics of modern politics (as manifest in liberalism and democracy) is that it works against hierarchy, place, and purpose. Moreover, the Crowd also work against this realisation: The Crowd stands for the many and is pitted against the individual. As such, the Crowd posits nothing over something. Mass democracy is the manifestation of this phenomena; a phenomena which contributes towards an age which is not devoid of passion and *re*-action, but which is devoid of meaningful reflection, action and responsibility.[99] Mass democracy is the tool of the Crowd and enables it to tyrannise over the individual. In addition, whilst lacking responsibility, the anonymous mass is more powerful than any despot. Indeed, the Crowd

[96] *Two Ages*, p. 84; Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers Volume 1*. (Edited and Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, assisted by Gregor Malantschuk, Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1967), Section 794.

[97] *Either/Or Part I*, p. 141; A comment which is also reflected in *Journals 4*, Section 4117.

[98] For example, David B. Fletcher claims that 'Kierkegaard's conservatism is of a novel sort'. *Social and Political Perspectives in the Thought of Søren Kierkegaard*. David Bruce Fletcher. (University Press of America, 1982) 5; M. Plekon writes that 'Kierkegaard was hardly a dogmatic or even an orthodox conservative'. ''Towards Apocalypse: Kierkegaard's *Two Ages* in Golden Age Denmark''. Ed. R.L. Perkins. *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Two Ages*, p. 47; and Bruce Kirmmse argues that, 'Far from being the politics of an authoritarian conservative or demented irrationalist, Kierkegaard's politics should be seen as the healthy and enormously fertile and insightful self-criticism of bourgeois liberal society, posited from a radically otherworldly Christian point of view'. *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) 4.

[99] *Two Ages*, p. 67.

represents a new form of tyranny.[100] This form of tyranny is more insipid and debilitating than the more commonly recognised form, as from the Crowd there is no place to hide, nor is there a decisive point reached where the tyrant is seen to be defeated; or we are defeated by the tyrant.[101] What is most diabolical about this new form of tyranny is that the Crowd destroys the character of the oppressed.[102] Whereas with an individual tyrant it is possible to relate to an idea, there is no such possibility in a 'people's government' as due to its very nature it is not clear who the ruler is, and what their principles are. As Kierkegaard ruefully warns:

> A people's government is the true picture of hell. For even if one could last out its torment, it would still be a relief if one got permission to be alone; but the torment is that "the others" tyrannise over one.[103]

Kierkegaard's linking of a 'people's government' and 'hell' is more than a stylistic flourish. For Kierkegaard the tyranny of the many over the one is demonic as not only does it fail to recognise the individuality of the Single Individual, but it also threatens through its levelling qualities to cut 'the Single Individual' off from fulfilling their Christian task of coming into relation with God.[104] Of course, these "anti-Crowd" sentiments are common-place amongst many European thinkers of the nineteenth century. For example, they are echoed in the thought of J.S. Mill, Tocqueville, and Nietzsche.[105] What differentiates Kierkegaard's position and attack on the Crowd is not that it would be an impediment to liberal progress, or in Nietzsche's case an impediment to cultural excellence, but that it thwarts *religious* development. In other words, for Kierkegaard the mass thwarts individuality not because it is anti-liberal or potentially threatening to democracy, but because its very existence undermines an understanding and experience of the individual as a religious concept. As a part of the mass, a person can neither relate to an ideal, others, or their own potential selfhood.

It is in this way that Kierkegaard links the dynamic of the Crowd with the attendant notion and phenomena of levelling. Levelling manifests politically as the

[100] *Journals 4*, Section 4235.

[101] *Journals 4*, Sections 4144, 4235.

[102] Cf. M. Plekon. *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Two Ages*, Ed. R.L. Perkins, p. 44; And Lee Barrett, *op. cit.*, p. 68, where 'the danger is not riotous reflective aestheticism, but the dissolution of potential individuals into the amorphous "public".'

[103] *Journals 4*, Sections 4144, 4166.

[104] Cf. Barrett, "Kierkegaard's Two Ages: An Immediate Stage on the Way to the Religious Life". *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Two Ages*, Ed. R.L. Perkins p. 57, where 'the multiple values and expectations of society can dominate the subject. In such a state the self is unconscious of itself a something distinguishable from its natural and social environment, and is incapable of true responsible, purposeful activity'; See also, Merlod Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society*, who writes that 'when human society insists on being something more than human, it ends up as something catastrophically less than human', p. 40, and that this occurs through the 'self-deification of the We', p. 33.

[105] Cf. J.S. McClelland, *A History of Western Political Thought*. (London: Routledge, 1996) 469–470; Nietzsche. *Beyond Good and Evil*, (Translated by R.J. Hollingdale, Introduction by Michael Tanner; England: Penguin Books, 1990), Section 262; Nietzsche. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. (Translated with an Introduction and Notes by R.J. Hollingdale; England: Penguin Books, 1969), II Sections 6 and 12.

call for equality and the authority of numbers. In an age devoid of passion, where there is no real unified communal life, and where abstraction (both in terms of thought and social life) reigns supreme, levelling is the result. Levelling is the nihilistic tendency towards the dissolution of individuals, and the inability to act due to a bankruptcy in value and meaning. As presented in *Two Ages* the levelling process is the culmination of the characteristics of the Present Age. Levelling is not, and cannot be, the actions of any one given individual.[106] Instead, levelling is 'a reflection-game in the hand of an abstract power'.[107] It is a reflection-game as it is in the deficiencies of the *exercise* of reflection, and particularly their detachment from action, that form the contours of the game. The Crowd is the abstract power at work here. Levelling is the manifestation of the absence of religiosity which no individual nor any 'assemblage' can halt.[108] Ultimately, levelling expresses itself in the empty phrase of 'pure humanity'.[109] This expression, which both dominates and is the ultimate expression of the Present Age, remains empty as it is both abstract and further depletes the personal relations between individuals.[110] Whilst a form of equality is achieved, the despairing reality is that it is the equality of nothings. Whilst previous ages had "approximations" to levelling, this was never true levelling as it was not sufficiently abstract. Indeed, Kierkegaard claims that:

> For levelling really to take place, a phantom must first be raised, the spirit of levelling, a monstrous abstraction, an all encompassing something that is nothing, a mirage—and this phantom is *the public*.[111]

For Kierkegaard, then, the 'decline of an age devoid of passion is just as degenerate' as the decline of monarchies or revolutions. Increasing numbers of people seek to 'join' the public and relate themselves to nothing higher than each other as natural men.[112] In doing so they fall into relation with nobodies, which of course is no relation at all.[113] Indeed, strictly speaking it is not even possible to speak of a relation between something and nothing; and even more mistaken to speak of a relation between nothings. Without these relationships neither the individual nor the community can exist for Kierkegaard. However, whilst all this apes the religious life,

[106] *Two Ages*, p. 86.
[107] *Two Ages*, p. 86.
[108] *Two Ages*, p. 87.
[109] *Two Ages*, p. 88; cf. *Sickness*, p. 46.
[110] Plekon, "Towards Apocalypse: Kierkegaard's *Two Ages* in Golden Age Denmark". *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Two Ages*. Ed. R.L. Perkins, p. 43, where levelling is the creation of a false equality; and Cutting, "The Levels of Interpersonal Relationships in Kierkegaard's *Two Ages*". *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Two Ages*. Ed. R.L. Perkins, p. 78, where levelling introduces an alienating equality.
[111] *Two Ages*, p. 90.
[112] *Journals 3*, Section 2999.
[113] *Two Ages*, p. 94.

the Present Age and an age built on true individuality and equality (religious life) remain fundamentally distinct:

> …eternal life is also a kind of levelling, and yet it is not so, for the denominator is this: to be an essentially human person in the religious sense.[114]

It is this equality that is striven for by the political programmes of the Present Age (even though they are mistaken about what "equality" means).[115] However, in Kierkegaard's view, these programmes are doomed to failure in the respect that they fail to provide adequate grounds for the transformation of self, and self-other relations. Indeed, they mistakenly focus on external relations to fulfil this task. For Kierkegaard this view fails to be informed by a notion of spirit, and treats men not as true individuals, but instead mistakes true individuality and equality for 'replication'. For Kierkegaard, nowhere is this more true than in his own bourgeois Copenhagen.

We can also see how Kierkegaard believes that mass democracies cannot provide decisiveness and governance. This is partly due to the endless reflective process of mass democracy which is aided by the Press.[116] This is the public manifestation of the private vicious circle of reflection. In addition, the Crowd do not recognise the right or authority of any one to govern them. That is to say, we are already too aware of our own reflective abilities and our own authority to accept the governance of another.[117] For Kierkegaard, this is also why representative democracy must flounder; however, we are not yet in a position to exercise that authority in decisive action.[118] Mass democracy does not, and cannot, enable true individuality and true selfhood to emerge in the Present Age. What mass democracy does above all else is to level and to appeal to the desires, prejudices and egoism of the prudent and reflective 'natural man'. Furthermore, in order to underline how the power of the Public is devoid of responsibility, Kierkegaard describes how the Public keeps a dog to set upon 'men of distinction' for its amusement in the form of the Press.[119]

As mentioned in the opening of this article, the Press come in for particular attack by Kierkegaard. And Kierkegaard clearly views the Press and being linked to the Crowd. Partly this might have been motivated by his own treatment at the hands of the satirical and feared *Corsair*.[120] However, his reasons for criticising the Press (even if motivated by personal concerns) remain coherent and plausible. For Kierkegaard the Press is the ultimate manifestation of the levelling power of the Crowd and an indictment of mass communication. The Press weakens the character of the individual and the ties between individuals by making communication impersonal.[121] For Kierkegaard this is a contradiction in terms, as communication itself presupposes a personal statement by a speaker who is committed to that

[114] *Two Ages*, p. 96.
[115] *Two Ages*, pp. 84–85, 89; *The Point of View*, p. 103–104; *Journals 4*, Sections 4131, 4206.
[116] R.L. Perkins, "Kierkegaard's Critique of the *Bourgeois* State". *Inquiry* 27: 207–218.
[117] *Journals 4*, Section 4109.
[118] *Journals 4*, Sections 4109, 4202.
[119] *Two Ages*, p. 95.
[120] For an account of this affair consult Lowrie, *A Short Life of Kierkegaard*, pp. 176–187.
[121] *Journals 4*, Sections 4160, 4166.

statement. In this way speech is authentic and felicitous: through the Press speech becomes worthless and spiteful 'chatter' with no edificatory value at all.[122] This is compounded by the fact that the institution of the Press allows anyone to make comment on another whilst remaining behind a cloak of anonymity. Ultimately Kierkegaard suspects the Press of seeking power for itself by denying the privacy and exclusiveness needed for government to rulers, whilst maintaining these qualities for itself.[123] But Kierkegaard's attacks on the Press are simultaneously attacks on the anonymous readers of the Press. These are the masses of individuals who deny their individuality to join the Crowd. This is betrayed by the forms of mass communication in the Present Age which produce nothing but "chatter" and are spoken by no one to no one.[124] What's more, they drown out, attack and demoralise those with an authentic voice.

From Kierkegaard's point of view, politics in modernity is in peril. It is not simply that Kierkegaard focuses on the inward or spiritual dimensions of human existence, nor is it that he finds many of the progressive elements of his own society distasteful or regrettable. Kierkegaard's objection is a far more fundamental one. For Kierkegaard, modern politics fails to recognise that the key to community and equality is the attainment of individuality, and that this can only be achieved through a spiritual understanding of the human. To attempt to understand the human in any other terms, be it self-interest, history, or even rationality, is to sell what it is to be a human being seriously short. In modern politics, democracy, liberalism, levelling, the Press, and the Crowd are all manifestations of this concept of man. Fundamentally, what Kierkegaard objects to, and what his thought warns, is that the only true foundation of external relations is a correctly formulated internal relation. As humans are spiritual beings, the normative state of human beings is to stand in relation to God and to accept the ideal of the spiritual self that they, and all others, can and should, become. In rejecting what is highest about a human being, modern politics condemns human beings to a less than ideal status, and a far from perfect association. In fact, as such a misrelation to God, to self, and to others, for Kierkegaard, modern politics can only be understood as a form of despair.

In these times everything is politics

It is now possible to draw together the strands of thought which have been pursued in this article, and to summarise Kierkegaard's contribution to our understanding of the political. As we have seen, Kierkegaard's criticisms of both the form that politics took in his own time, and the political in general, are founded on

[122] *Journals 4*, Section 4182.

[123] R.L. Perkins, "Kierkegaard's Critique of the Bourgeois State". *Inquiry*, 27: 214.

[124] Cf. R.L. Hall, *Word and Spirit* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1993), where 'As a matter of phenomenological description, then, bedrock to our concrete human existence is the fact *that we speak*… . At the heart of what we do uniquely as persons is our capacity to speak in the first person, to speak in our own voice', p. 10.

ontological claims concerning the misrelation of a spiritual selfhood. It is this misrelation that distorts the possibilities of the political as it is a fracturing and obscuring of both the person's understanding of their self and their relations to others, *and* the potentialities of what it means to be a human being and to live in a true community. In modern times, where politics is based on a purely human notion of the person (be it self-interested, numerically equal, rational, or temporally perfectible), the foundational role of the divine in defining human being as a spiritual entity is usurped by a paganism which either rejects spirituality, or (at best) merely pays lip-service to Christianity. Thus, despair and sin replace selfhood and faith: idols replace ideals.

So, in Kierkegaard's account unless selfhood is aimed for, despair mires all human actions and human relations. A person might not be directed by a true sense of self but by natural or ego-centric goals. Despite this, it is perfectly possible for the person to appear to be socially well-adjusted, and even appear to act in an ethical manner. However, for Kierkegaard the tragedy of this situation is that there is no spiritual dimension to the person's life, and so they are not a true self, and cannot relate in a genuine way to the existence of others. In a sense, the person is constructed by and determined by the social situations and values that they find themselves cast into.[125] What is interesting about Kierkegaard's account is that not only are social relations dependent upon the notion and development of selfhood, but that the development of selfhood necessarily leads to an engagement with the social. Furthermore, engagement based upon selfhood is the only possible form of ethico-political engagement. There is an inward turn, and this can only be performed by the individual, but this does not mean that the individual is to be isolated or sterilised from contact with others or the world.

Finally, we might reflect that Kierkegaard claimed that 'In these times everything is politics'.[126] It is a claim that points to the misunderstanding of the religious and the pathways to the religious in modern times. However, the statement itself dissolves the concept of the political before our very eyes. By pointing to the absence and misunderstanding about what it means to talk about and to be religious, Kierkegaard is also alerting us to our misunderstanding concerning what it means to talk about and to be political. Whilst Kierkegaard can claim that everything is politics, he also reminds us that nothing is politics. That is to say, both the truly political and the truly religious are spirited away under the conditions of modernity: neither can exist as the foundations for both spheres have been lost along with the subject's understanding of what is involved is *becoming* a "self". In short, for Kierkegaard, in modernity people fail to recognise what they are, and the seriousness of the task of selfhood itself. Without a proper understanding of self there can be no possibility of politics.[127] Politics can, at best, be an arena for reaching decision; but it

[125]Julia Watkin. *Historical Dictionary of Kierkegaard's Philosophy*. (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2001) 64–65.

[126]*The Point of View*, p. 103.

[127]Cf. Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society*, p. 40; and, Gene Outaka, "Equality and Individuality: Thoughts on Two Themes in Kierkegaard", *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 10: 2 (1982) 172.

cannot do more than that. Crucially, it does not achieve the truth, and it cannot forge the good citizen or 'heal' humanity. However, Kierkegaard's concern is that liberal democracy even fails to reach adequate decision. For Kierkegaard, this is a double problem as not only does modern politics provide a bad form of reaching decision (which should be the pursuit of the individual), but it also acts to threaten any decision at all. The confusion of the Crowd, its inability to articulate or relate to the ideal, and its failure to understand the spiritual aspects of the human, lead not only to a bad politics, but also despair. In Kierkegaard's thought the Crowd is an abstract power that not only diverts us from true selfhood and community, but also acts to undermine the conditions in which selfhood and a true community and politics could emerge.

Of course, there are many questions that Kierkegaard leaves unanswered. Whilst his critique is a potentially powerful one, he does not propose a positive programme.[128] He does not describe the details of a future normative politics—and it certainly has not been my intention to present Kierkegaard's contribution in this mould. In many ways we might find this both disappointing and ultimately unsatisfactory; but it might also encourage us to reflect upon why we make such a demand, and as to why (possibly) Kierkegaard does not meet it. Kierkegaard cannot describe the details of such a politics precisely because to do so would be to collapse his critique of the political into politics. In such a move, in making *specific* recommendations, Kierkegaard's finely balanced critique would be lost to the 'controversies' of his day, the 'authority of numbers', and would simply become one party or faction amongst many. What Kierkegaard can do is to point to the foundations of a normative politics; but he can do no more. To initiate a positive politics would be to fail to take the task of selfhood seriously. For this to happen, every person must become an individual for themselves, and to take responsibility in regard to their own self and others. Only then will a normative political community be able to emerge. Until such a time all that can be done is to outline the foundations for critique of all manifested forms of politics—a critique which as we have seen brings the ontological status of the human and the political together under the category of the spiritual. To do more than this is to run the risk of becoming both demoralised by the political, and to add to that demoralisation. In short, Kierkegaard's critique would become a part of the problem, and not an *identification of* the problem. The problem for Kierkegaard is then both political and spiritual. Indeed, in the Present Age, we have lost an understanding of not only politics, but also ourselves. To fail to recognise ourselves and others as spiritual selves is to fail to truly understand what it means to be a self. It is a despair—but a despair which modern politics cannot even perceive. As Kierkegaard has Anti-Climacus declare:

[128]In this way, Kierkegaard's thought suffers from some of the 'limitations' of others of his time, especially Nietzsche and Marx both of whom provide critiques of politics, but leave us wondering as to exactly what their alternative society would look like.

> The greatest hazard of all, losing the self, can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all. No other loss can occur so quietly; any other loss—an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc.—is sure to be noticed.[129]

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[129] *Sickness*, pp. 32–33.