

# Kierkegaard's Existential Theory of the Political

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the joint degree of PhD in: Philosophy and Politics, at Lancaster University.

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17/06/2014.



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**Declaration of the thesis:**

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. I declare that all work in this thesis is my own, and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere. Chapter five of this thesis (“Kierkegaard’s ‘Aesthetic Age’ and its Political Consequences”) has been published, by the exact same name and in a very similar version in Alison Assiter and Margherita Tonon’s (Eds.) *Kierkegaard and the Political* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), pp. 63-82.

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**Abstract:**

Few, if any scholars have seriously investigated whether Kierkegaard had a theory of the political or not. This thesis questions the absence of this literature. The central argument of this thesis is that Kierkegaard developed a theory of the political which was principally grounded in his existentialist concerns and commitments.

I shall argue, furthermore, that Kierkegaard’s existential theory of the political is; systematically laid out; intriguing and original; comprehensive and detailed; theoretically grounded; consistent throughout the authorship (and with other key concepts of Kierkegaard’s philosophy); justifies an existentially-motivated kind of political activism; and hence that is non-trivially responsive to external change; and that is inextricably linked with Kierkegaard’s social theory.

These arguments contribute to Kierkegaard scholarship by clarifying exactly what the ‘political elements’ of Kierkegaard’s thought are. Furthermore, the thesis responds to numerous critics of the political dimension to Kierkegaard’s work, who would claim that either Kierkegaard’s political insights are ‘scattered’ and unsystematic, ‘essentially individualistic’, or ‘impotent with regards to worldly change’. I also contribute to Kierkegaard scholarship by arguing that any and all of Kierkegaard’s involvements with politics can be seen as deriving from his principal existentialist concerns.

Aside from contributing to Kierkegaard scholarship, this thesis also opens up the possibility of bringing Kierkegaard into contemporary debates concerning theories of the political. ‘How might Kierkegaard’s existential theory of the political inform contemporary political thought’ is but one example of the kinds of questions that are raised by this thesis.

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# Kierkegaard's Existential Theory of the Political: Introduction.<sup>1</sup>

Few, if any scholars have seriously investigated whether Kierkegaard had a theory of the political or not. This thesis questions the absence of this literature. In fact, the central argument of this thesis is that Kierkegaard developed an existential theory of the political.

To be fair to the excellent work of contemporary Kierkegaard scholars, many have convincingly argued against the tradition of believing that Kierkegaard is an apolitical theorist. Yet even amongst this contemporary literature the idea that there might be theoretical foundations for Kierkegaard's political thought is still a highly contested position. If many contemporary Kierkegaard scholars fail to attribute a 'theory of the political' to Kierkegaard, one could be forgiven for assuming that this must be because Kierkegaard does not have one. In opposition to this interpretation, however, I argue that Kierkegaard does develop a theory of the political - one that it is fundamentally based on his primary interest in the spiritual and existential development of the individual.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my sincere thanks to both Dr. Graham M. Smith and to Professor Alison Stone for their help and guidance, the result of which is visible throughout this thesis. This thesis has also greatly benefited from the helpful comments and suggestions of Dr. Clare Carlisle, and Dr. Gavin Hyman. I would also like to thank the ESRC for granting me a generous studentship, without which this thesis would not have been possible.

That Kierkegaard was first and foremost interested in existence [*tilblivelse*] is not an uncontroversial view. Kierkegaard's existential commitments are well-known and arguably occupy his entire authorship. But I would also argue that Kierkegaard has much to say about the legitimate scope and role of politics. In fact, I shall argue that Kierkegaard explicitly delineates a theory of the political - an ontological characterisation of what should be considered as 'political' entities and by implication non-political entities, as well as a theory of how the two ought to relate. Additionally, I argue that this theory of the political is based on Kierkegaard's primary commitment to the existential development of each and every single human being, and hence it is an *existential* theory of the political. Aside from delineating his theory of the political, Kierkegaard also outlines a variety of different ways that individuals might become existentially impoverished if his theory of the political is not implemented and respected.

In extreme circumstances, when political decisions put the existential development of citizens at great risk and nothing but political action could remedy the situation, Kierkegaard even advocates a kind of existentially based political activism. Hence, whilst it is fair to say that Kierkegaard does not develop anything like the kind of political programme that typifies political theorists (nor, for that matter, does he give us much in the way of a theory of government), Kierkegaard does nevertheless provide us with a detailed account of when government policies can and ought to be challenged upon existential grounds. Hence, Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political also provides a theoretical justification for ensuring that policy alterations are kept in check, as well as a guide as to the kind of political activism that is an appropriate response to illegitimate policies. Kierkegaard's involvement with politics

focusses on ensuring that individuals have the ability to pursue unhindered existential development. Kierkegaard endorses political activism when this basic human function is put at jeopardy.

Aside from his theory of the political, Kierkegaard also delineates a social theory. It turns out that in order for genuine sociability to flourish between individuals each person must be permitted the space to develop spiritually and authentically. Therefore, the justification for existential activism that Kierkegaard's theory of the political warrants is also a vital component of ensuring the possibility of genuine sociability and authentic community. Hence, whilst Kierkegaard's theory of the political often emphasizes the development of the single individual it is nevertheless a necessary component of Kierkegaard's social theory and so (the former) cannot properly be considered as 'individualistic'.

I will pursue the argument that Kierkegaard has an existential theory of the political throughout all eight chapters of this thesis. In chapter one, I outline what I mean by a 'theory of the political'; and in chapter three I specifically outline *Kierkegaard's* 'existential' theory of the political. I maintain that Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political occupied, in some way at least, his entire authorship in a coherent manner that also incorporates many of his well-known, key philosophical tenets (chapters four through seven). This reading implies that Kierkegaard's thought, as expressed in his pseudonymous and non-pseudonymous works alike, was far more socially reflexive than has often been believed. I shall also argue that Kierkegaard's theory of the political justifies a kind of existential activism (chapters five through seven). Furthermore, I maintain that Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political is non-

trivially responsive towards external socio-political change (chapters five through seven). (This argument is made in opposition both to contemporary scholarship which is examined in chapter two, as well as Theodor Adorno's renowned critique of Kierkegaard examined in chapter seven.) Finally, I also argue that Kierkegaard's existential of the theory goes hand-in-hand with an existentially motivated social theory (chapter seven).

In short then, my central thesis is that Kierkegaard defends an existential theory of the political (chs. 1&3); that is consistent throughout the entire authorship (4); that justifies a kind of political activism (5-7); and hence is non-trivially responsive to external change (5-7); and finally that contributes towards his social theory (7).

## Outline of the thesis.

### Chapter 1

The primary focus of 'Chapter 1' is to define the phrase 'theory of the political'. In doing so, I shall differentiate the notion of a 'theory of the political' from that of a 'political theory', as well as from a 'political programme'. I will provide a working taxonomy of these and other similar political terms. I will also examine the works of some canonical political theorists (and theorists of the political) to test the intuitiveness of the taxonomy I present, as well as to help clarify some of the distinctions I seek to make. In examining these canonical political thinkers, I will also attempt to identify which aspects of their respective theories can properly be considered as contributing to 'political theory' and/or which contribute towards a 'theory of the political'.

One of the central arguments of this thesis is that scholars have sometimes deemed Kierkegaard 'apolitical' because he does not provide a theoretical basis for selecting which policies a government ought to implement. Whilst I agree with the latter part of this claim, I shall argue that providing a programme of positive policies is only a requirement of one who is considered a political theorist. I think it is quite fair to say that Kierkegaard lacked a theory of real-world, *positive* policy implementations. Additionally, I also believe that Kierkegaard has very little to say about the *forms* that

a government might or ought to adopt, i.e., whether it should be democratic, monarchical, or republican, etc. For both of these reasons, I believe that Kierkegaard is not properly speaking a 'political theorist'. Nevertheless, we should not hastily conclude from this that Kierkegaard ought not to be considered as a 'political thinker' at all. On the contrary, I shall argue that Kierkegaard is a theorist *of* the political. When appreciated as a theorist of the political Kierkegaard has much to say about how the political realm legitimately relates to the non-political realm, and about the kind of political activism we should endorse when the former is not being practised in an authentic way. Hence, just because Kierkegaard is not a political theorist this does not warrant us in thinking that he is therefore either an 'apolitical' thinker, or that his political contribution is fragmentary and/or lacking theoretical foundation.

Mistaken views about Kierkegaard's political thought might have thus been perpetuated by the fact that a 'theory of the political' and a 'political theory' have not previously been clearly distinguishing between in the literature concerning Kierkegaard's political thought.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the conceptual clarification that I undertake in 'Chapter 1' is part of my attempt at valuing Kierkegaard's political importance for his particularly novel theory of the political.

Through examining the intellectual contribution of the political theorist John Locke, I also attempt to set the ground for defending Kierkegaard from another critique. I pursue an increasingly popular interpretation of Locke which sees his political theory as a direct result of his primary, theological interests. In a sense then, Locke's political theory is an attempt at implementing God's will on earth, by arranging political

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<sup>2</sup> If it was not for the insight and guidance of Dr. Graham Smith, Professor Alison Stone, Dr. Clare Carlisle, and Dr. Gavin Hyman, I also would not have become aware of this conceptual difference.



institutions in a way that accords with Locke's interpretation of the Bible. Whether this interpretation affords us with the most 'correct' way of understanding Locke's political theory is not my principal interest here though. What is important for this thesis is the following query: *if* Locke *was* interested first and foremost in theological concerns and political ones only secondarily, would this affect our judgement of considering Locke to be a political theorist? I argue that the content of Locke's political theory is valid as such in its own right independent of its origins, or of the intentions of the historical figure John Locke.

The reason for considering this line of argument is that a scholar has recently argued that Kierkegaard ought properly to be considered an 'a-political' thinker, because his political commitments are only secondary to his principal theological concerns (Garff, 1999). In response, I argue that Kierkegaard ought to be considered as a 'theorist of the political' for the same reasons that 'John-Locke-as-principally-theologian' ought to be considered a political theorist: the content of Kierkegaard's thought, irrespective of its origins or intentions, is such that it justifies us in calling him a theorist of the political. The fact that Kierkegaard's theory of the political is grounded in ('non-political') existential commitments does not change the fact that a theory of the political is nevertheless presented.

This opening chapter therefore gives a cursory definition of what Kierkegaard's basic political position is. An analysis of other canonical political philosophers highlights how Kierkegaard's theory of the political is similar in some respects to the thought of other accepted theorists of the political, as well as how it is differentiated from traditional political theory.

## **Chapter 2**

The primary focus of 'Chapter 2' is to outline the leading trends in contemporary Kierkegaard scholarship. For roughly one-hundred and twenty years now scholars have scarcely found anything politically interesting in Kierkegaard's authorship. Much of the lack of a political interest in Kierkegaard's works could be due to lack of availability or quality of available translations. What I refer to as the 'modern period' of Kierkegaard research has, however, had access to complete collections of Kierkegaard's works in dominant languages. Furthermore, contemporary scholars are blessed with the ability to engage in international collaboration and cross-referencing to a degree that has never before been possible.

Nevertheless, even amongst contemporary Kierkegaard scholars who specialise in his political thought, the idea that Kierkegaard provides us with a theoretical basis for politics is still a minority opinion which is open to controversy. I outline some of the key trends in this contemporary Kierkegaard scholarship. The most frequent form of criticism charged against Kierkegaard is that he fails to provide an in-depth account of what kinds of policies we should endorse and establish. Later on in the thesis I will come back to this point, arguing that Kierkegaard has theoretical reasons for purposely resisting to provide such an account. In 'Chapter 2', however, we will see that many contemporary scholars judge this absence as a 'lamentable' loss (rather

than a necessary aspect of Kierkegaard's political thought), or even as evidence that Kierkegaard should not be considered as a political thinker.

### Chapter 3

In 'Chapter 3' I will outline Kierkegaard's theory of the political. Many of Kierkegaard's explicit references to his theory of the political can be found in two of his works - *An Open Letter*, and *The Point of View of my Work as an Author* – as well as with his on-going interest in Luther's reformation (which is noted in scattered comments in some of his later works but also in many journal entries). Many of these texts, incidentally, were not fully published within Kierkegaard's own life-time, and translations of these works have also been historically late. Furthermore, Kierkegaard's more 'sensationalistic' pseudonymous works have been given more historical attention than these obscure references to politics. This might partially explain why, historically speaking, many have failed to find a theory of the political in Kierkegaard's authorship.

'Chapter 3' provides the textual grounds for my argument that Kierkegaard developed a theory of the political. In the three areas of Kierkegaard's work under examination, Kierkegaard explicitly defines what he takes to be the proper scope, purpose, and methodology of the political realm. In short, Kierkegaard believes that the political realm has legitimate authority over the temporal (psychical and physical) wellbeing of human beings; as long as the individual's existential and spiritual livelihood is not

also jeopardised. Understanding what are properly speaking 'temporal' concerns (which politics can legitimately regulate), and what are 'spiritual' concerns (which genuine politics ought not to attempt to govern) is a pivotal part of Kierkegaard's theory of the political. Therefore, I will also provide an outline of Kierkegaard's anthropological beliefs since they detail what the 'temporal' and the 'spiritual' aspects of human life are.

In doing so, we see that Kierkegaard separates entities into those which are fit for the political realm to legislate (given the means that are also appropriate to the latter), and those that are not (for similar reasons). Kierkegaard therefore engages in a kind of political ontology, separating areas of life that are properly speaking 'political', and those that are 'non-political'. Furthermore, Kierkegaard gives frequent and compelling arguments for this categorisation as well as convincing justifications of its enforcement. Finally, Kierkegaard describes how the political and the non-political ought to relate to one another. Hence, in the various texts under consideration, Kierkegaard outlines his theory of the political. The fact that the latter is mapped out in order to preserve the sanctity of the existential development of persons (i.e., is grounded in a 'non-political' commitment) does not detract from the fact that Kierkegaard provides compelling arguments and justifications in defence of a theory of the political.

## Chapter 4

In chapter four I take my first detailed look at one of Kierkegaard's works to see how his theory of the political informs other aspects of his authorship. The work in question is a purported review of Hans Christian Andersen's third novel *Only a Fiddler* [*Kun en Spillemand*, 1837]. Despite being a review, however, the text is filled with references to key concepts that are later elucidated throughout Kierkegaard's entire authorship. *From the Papers* is also one of the earliest works to show Kierkegaard thinking about political issues. It is likely that Kierkegaard had not thoroughly worked out his theory of the political at the time of publishing *From the Papers*. Nevertheless, the early engagement with key concepts which relate both to Kierkegaard's existential and political views is insightful and worth examining for a number of reasons.

For one thing, Kierkegaard's early attempt at highlighting the respective boundaries between the political and the existential realm highlights that Kierkegaard was not merely interested in social and political issues in his later, signed writings. That Kierkegaard might have been examining the relationship between the existential and the political in this early work also provides partial evidence for the view that he might have had existential/political concerns in mind throughout the entire authorship - pseudonymous as well as signed.

*From the Papers* argues that Hans Christian Andersen's impoverished existential development was partly a 'product of the times'. This in turn creates the possibility of interpreting Kierkegaard's other portrayals of impoverished existential life-views (examples of which are frequently found the pseudonymous authorship) as highlighting ways in which various social phenomenon might be partly to blame for fostering those existentially inauthentic ways of life.

Kierkegaard's analysis of Andersen evidences an early interest in theorising about the various ways that socio-political institutions affect the existential and spiritual development of the individual. Hence, *From the Papers* could signal Kierkegaard's early interest in issues which would later inform his existential theory of the political.

## Chapter 5

In chapter five I look at another of Kierkegaard's works, namely *Two Ages*. Incidentally, this work is also a purported review. But the review (which is almost as long as the original work itself) is again used by Kierkegaard as a point of departure for an exposition of his own political principles; and especially for another (more) in-depth discussion of how the political and the existential ought to relate.

In this chapter, I will also examine the concept of an 'aesthetic' age (5.1), a term not infrequently found within Kierkegaard scholarship. Whilst Kierkegaard does not use the phrase '[a]esthetic age' *as such* he makes very similar statements; calling 'the age'

one of 'esthetic disintegration', for example. On the basis of these comments, I analyse what it could mean for Kierkegaard to call an *age* aesthetic, especially in light of the fact that this existential term had previously only been used to describe a single individual.

An analysis of Kierkegaard's review also shows that Kierkegaard once more delineates the boundaries of the political realm with the existential; a point which has been recognised in recent Kierkegaard scholarship. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard also uses the work to outline the legitimate scope of *political activity* that one can undertake whilst faithfully being committed to a principal concern with the existential development of others. Thus whilst arguably being Kierkegaard's most political work, in *Two Ages* we are nevertheless reminded of the limitations of resorting to political activity in solving existential problems. In differentiating between legitimate and illegitimate political engagement, Kierkegaard outlines the beginning of a theory of existentially grounded political activism. Recognising that Kierkegaard's works contain the justification for a kind of political activism also lends support to the notion that Kierkegaard's theory of the political is more concerned with bringing about external changes than scholars have typically believed. This critical point is more thoroughly examined in the sixth chapter of this thesis.

## Chapter 6

In the sixth chapter I analyse Kierkegaard's 'attack on Christendom' (as pursued in various different journal articles, but recently and posthumously compiled into one book – *The Moment*) (6.1). I argue that Kierkegaard's 'attack' is an example of his existential theory of the political being used to justify (a negative) political change (6.2). Hence, an analysis of this part of Kierkegaard's authorship provides an example of both the promotion and justification of a political change due to the infringement of primarily existential interests.

Kierkegaard also provides additional information about when 'existential activism' is not only appropriate but required of each of us. Briefly put, when a governmental policy is causing existential harm, and when there are no other feasible ways of curing the existential problem than through existential activism, the latter is justified.

In the concluding remarks to the sixth chapter (6.3), I look back at the critiques that some of the contemporary Kierkegaard scholarship had made with respect to Kierkegaard's political thought (which had been briefly outlined in chapter two). As we shall see, some of these scholars have claimed that Kierkegaard's theory of the political is impotent with regards to real-world changes. Yet in chapter six I shall argue that, far from being incompatible with real-world, political changes, Kierkegaard's existential political theory and anthropological beliefs imply a theory of political activism.



## Chapter 7

Kierkegaard has historically been considered by many as an essentially 'individualistic' theorist. In fact, much of our own analysis of Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political supports the idea that he was enormously interested in the spiritual welfare of the single individual. Theodor Adorno made a number of insightful and prescient criticisms of Kierkegaard's entire authorship including the charge that it is essentially individualistic; and his criticisms certainly apply to Kierkegaard's social and political thought here. Unlike some contemporary theorists, Adorno does *not* accuse Kierkegaard of lacking a social or political theory altogether. Instead, Adorno raises a pressing criticism of Kierkegaard's theory of the political *precisely because* the latter is existentially grounded. In other words, Adorno recognises that Kierkegaard's primary political commitment is to the spiritual development of each single individual, instead of, for example, his or her social equality – but this is precisely where he encounters problems with Kierkegaard's political and social thought.

Adorno forwarded these criticisms throughout his authorship, and especially in his debut work 'Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic'. Nevertheless, I choose not to dedicate the seventh chapter to an analysis of this first work. Throughout this thesis I apply an interpretation of Kierkegaard that takes what is said in the signed authorship as Kierkegaard's own view of matters, unless mitigating circumstances suggest otherwise. This reading is in quite direct opposition to the hermeneutical

practice that Adorno uses in *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*. Rather than engage in a debate about why I think that the interpretation I pursue might be a 'truer' interpretation of Kierkegaard's works, however, I examine Adorno's second major engagement with Kierkegaard: his *Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love*.

This work is preferable to study for a number of reasons. Firstly, it analyses a work of Kierkegaard's which was originally published in Kierkegaard's own name and (in line with the interpretation of Kierkegaard that I defend throughout the thesis) is therefore one which I claim is representative of Kierkegaard's own social theory. Hence, Adorno's critique is more pertinent in this second work partly because one cannot now claim that Adorno is merely attacking the view of a pseudonym. I believe that in Adorno's second work he is in fact directly attacking the social and political thought that Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political justifies.

The second reason for examining Adorno's *Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love* is because this work addresses Kierkegaard's book *Works of Love*. I shall argue that Kierkegaard best highlights the unity between his social and political thought in this same work. Hence, I can attempt to simultaneously show how Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political necessarily informs his social theory, as well as respond to Adorno's criticisms of the two, by centring on the debate(s) found between Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* and Adorno's *Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love*.

In short, chapter seven will continue the central thesis that Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political is not impotent with regards to external change (7.1.1), as well as making the additional claim that the former is a necessary element of Kierkegaard's

social theory (7.2). In outlining Kierkegaard's social theory, I also hope to refute readings of Kierkegaard that take his thought (including his theory of the political) to be essentially individualistic. These two sub-sections additionally provide ways of responding to Adorno's central criticisms of Kierkegaard's theory of the political; criticisms so insightful that even contemporary Kierkegaard scholars have pursued similar lines of argument.

## **Chapter 8 - Conclusion**

In the concluding chapter I summarise the central claims of this thesis, as well as gesture towards the contributions they might make for contemporary debates and for future scholarship. In drawing together key elements of each of the other chapters, I surmise that Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political is: systematically laid out; intriguing and original; comprehensive and detailed; theoretically grounded; consistent throughout the authorship (and with other key concepts of Kierkegaard's philosophy); non-trivially responsive to external change; and supportive of both individual existential improvement as well as genuine sociality. This proves that Kierkegaard's theory of the political is far more substantive than merely fragmented and scattered political remarks or insights. I primarily seek to contribute to Kierkegaard scholarship; to clarify what it might mean to recognise that there are 'political elements' to Kierkegaard's thought; and to emphasise that all and any of Kierkegaard's involvements with politics are derived from of a principal commitment to existentialist concerns.

Nevertheless, my conclusion shows that Kierkegaard's theory of the political is substantive enough to be a feasible alternative to contemporary methods of theorising about the political. Whilst I could not hope to give sufficient attention as to such questions as whether Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political might be a *preferable* alternative to contemporary theories of the political or not, I hope to have at least facilitated future scholarship in this area. Aside from aiming at contributing to Kierkegaard scholarship, therefore, I also hope that this work opens up discussions concerning existential theories of the political more generally, and the importance of Kierkegaard's thought within contemporary debates about the political more specifically.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### Theory of the political.

#### Introduction.

Giving definitions to concepts such like ‘the political’, ‘theory’, ‘political theory’, and ‘theory of the political’, are notoriously difficult. In spite of this, it is necessary to clarify what I mean when I employ these terms; since the thesis I will defend is that Kierkegaard is a theorist of the political. Thus, in this chapter I will attempt to provide a working definition of some of these key concepts. My aim is not to attempt to re-define a concept in a novel way, but is far more pragmatic. I seek to make some conceptual clarifications in order to avoid potential misunderstandings. Thus, for example, I believe that Kierkegaard is a theorist of the political; but I will not argue that he is a political theorist. Kierkegaard’s reception has often involved theorists believing that Kierkegaard is not the latter, and therefore is not the former. I take this position to be incorrect and largely founded upon conceptual misunderstandings with regards to the two terms. Hence, I will differentiate between the concepts ‘political theorist’ and ‘theorist of the political’ (as well as a third: ‘political programme’),

making clarifications and distinctions as I go along in order to minimise misinterpreting what I take to be Kierkegaard's (admittedly rather novel and in some senses radical) position.

In my attempt to differentiate a 'political theorist' from a 'theorist of the political' I will be juxtaposing the theories of two canonical 'political theorists' (i.e., John Locke [1632-1704], and Jean-Jacques Rousseau [1712-1778]) with Kierkegaard's theory of the political. This juxtaposition could be seen to make a strong case *against* Kierkegaard being considered a 'political theorist'. This claim is inadvertent but also, given the restrictions of my project, must unfortunately remain relatively undeveloped. Whether Kierkegaard is also a 'political theorist' is an interesting question that I think deserves more academic study. Unfortunately, however, to faithfully undertake such a task would require the kind of detailed analysis that I cannot hope to offer in the space of this piece given my other aims.

The central task for this chapter is simply to make a start at highlighting why I shall consider Kierkegaard a theorist of the political; and an important part of that task is to make sure the reader does not think that by this I mean a 'political theorist'. As I will go on to show in chapter 2 where I deal with the reception of Kierkegaard's work, some of the mainstream reasons for believing Kierkegaard to be 'apolitical' altogether has been due to the fact that his work does not (in any obvious sense at least) present us with a clear 'political theory'. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard's work is politically relevant, I shall argue, because it affords us an insightful and novel 'theory of the political' that is timely because it challenges many of the mainstream assumptions that contemporary 'theorists of the political' practise today.

In what follow I will be making use of a wide variety of interrelated but different terms. This ‘taxonomy’, if you will, is laid out on the next page and could serve as a useful point of reference. Most, if not all of the concepts and the statements I make about them are uncontroversial - or so I hope. Despite the fact that I take these definitions to be unproblematic I will nevertheless highlight some of the distinctions between the terms as I engage in conceptual clarification below. Whenever this is done, I will make a reference back to the following table (e.g., that ‘Ontology’ ‘classifies entities into groups’ will be cited as ‘#1.1’):

**Figure 1.1: Working Taxonomy of Key Political Terms**

| Key concept: |  |
|--------------|--|
| #1           | <div><div>'Ontology'</div><div>Definition: Defining what there is, or could be, and the relations between such entities.</div><div>Characteristics:</div><div><div>#1.1</div><div>Classifies entities into groups.</div></div><div><div>#1.2</div><div>Hence can demarcate certain entities from others.</div></div><div><div>#1.3</div><div>Can include things that are even opposed to the political (<i>anti-political</i>)</div></div><div><div>#1.4</div><div>Can explain why and/or how distinct entities or different classes of entities relate.</div></div></div> |
| #2           | <div><div>Theory of the political</div><div>Definition: An ontology specifically directed towards ‘political’ (and by implication, non-political) entities.</div></div>  |

Characteristics:

- #2.1 Must differentiate the political from the non-political.
- #2.2 Must say *why* or *how* the two classes are distinct.
- #2.3 Must describe how the 'political' and the 'non-political' differ – but also how they relate.
- #2.4 Can delineate entities which are 'properly' 'non-political' – i.e., entities which *should not* be treated as if they were political because of the possibly undesirable effects of doing so.
- #2.5 Similarly, can delineate entities which are 'properly' 'political' – i.e., entities which *should* be treated as if they were political because of the possibly undesirable effects of not doing so.
- #2.6 Hence, can be informed by an understanding of what is desirable and undesirable.
- #2.7 Hence can be informed by non-political commitments.
- #2.8 The 'political' can be valued higher, lower, or equally to these non-political commitments.
- #2.9 Despite #2.4 and #2.5, need not specify how the political and non-political ought to be *arranged*.
- #2.10 Need not include an understanding of what the purpose or goal of the political is – but might contain an understanding of what the political ought *not* to do (perhaps ever).
- #2.11 Hence, **can** include a theory of the *legitimate* and *illegitimate scope* of the political realm.

#3

**Political Theory**

Definition: An account of how we should arrange political entities.

Characteristics:

- #3.1 **Must** give a theoretical account of how political entities are to be practically arranged in real-world situations (i.e., this is no longer just an account of the ontological relations between entities that may or may not exist in reality.)
- #3.2 Can be a normative account or a descriptive account.
- #3.2 An example of a descriptive political theory might be Hobbes': i.e., given the *descriptive* account of how people *are*, and of what sovereignty is, political entities ought to be arranged in such-a-such way as to *reconcile these facts*.
- #3.3 An example of a normative political theory might be Mill or Rousseau: i.e., given the *normative* account of how people *could be*, and of what sovereignty is, political entities ought



to be arranged in such-a-such way as to *promote some value or pursue some good*.

#3.4 **Must**, therefore, give an account of the *goal* or *purpose* of politics.

#3.5 Normative political theories are concerned with *how* arrangements should be made given an empirical situation (i.e., is no longer just an ontological account of the relations between entities that may or may not actually exist).

#3.6 Hence they must be responsive to real-world changes.

#3.7 Therefore, they ought to be implementable.

#3.8 Since a political theory specifies how we should arrange political entities in relation to non-political entities, it **must** include an account of the legitimate and illegitimate scope of the political realm.

#### #4

##### **Political policies**

Definition: Recommendations for political action or change using the means (executive and/or administrative power) of a political entity.

Characteristics:

#4.1 Can be 'negative' - i.e., highlight an area where change is required without necessarily providing a workable alternative.

#4.2 Can be 'positive' - i.e., provide a practical solution given the nature of the problem, the empirical conditions of the time and place, and the restrictions of governmental power (which could be theoretical restrictions derived from a theory of the political).

#4.3 Can be, or at least possibly become, a programme of change. This would require a *theory* (of the political, or political theory) for one to faithfully and feasibly derive a programme of policies from. A political programme could, in turn, be a 'negative political programme' – whereby a government or other political entity is systematically held in check; or it could be a 'positive political programme' – where real world changes could be advocated in response to almost any empirical circumstance.

## 1.1 Political policy: John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

### 1.1.1 John Locke.

To clarify some key concepts that I shall be employing (i.e., ‘political theory’, ‘theory of the political’, and ‘political policies’) I will look at the work of some canonical political thinkers and examine how various concepts are used within their thought. John Locke is canonically recognised as a political theorist. Many of Locke’s concepts and ideas are also well-known and hopefully uncontroversial. Thus an overview of Locke’s arguments should help us begin clarifying what is meant by the term ‘theorist of the political’ (as well as other concepts).

John Locke provides us with a *theory* of what Government is, and what it ought to do. The government is a voluntarily entered agreement established to provide security for the preservation of ‘lives, liberties and estates’ – what Locke also calls more generally, ‘property’ (Book II, ch. 9, §123). Locke also claims that the best way to safeguard property is to enact laws (Book II, 19, §222). When it comes to the practice of safeguarding property, there are three positive roles that the government involvement is necessary for; ‘law-making’, enacting a ‘judiciary system’, and law ‘enforcement’.

Locke's theory of the *role* of the government - what it should do and provide - leads him on to more specific discussions of both the legitimate *practices* that the government should engage in, what the best governmental *form* is, and what activities are legitimately political (or civic) and what are not. Thus Locke also makes a distinction between what he claims are genuinely political issues, and other 'non-political' areas of life (satisfying condition #2.1 in figure 1.1 above). Thus, Locke provides us with a theory of government (its origin, role (#2.3), and ideal form) as well as a theory of the political (#2).

Concerning the legitimate scope of the political, Locke recognises that governmental action of any sort requires some form of taxation. This in turn relies on the consent of the citizenry to 'trade', as it were, what Locke calls 'natural rights' for 'civic rights'. The limiting condition of appealing the tacit consent of the majority (in questions of bartering natural rights for civil rights, at least) is one way of determining whether a governmental action is legitimate or illegitimate. But there are additional conditions than this.

For example, even if we were to imagine that laws are enacted and that the majority of the citizenry tacitly consent to them, there would still be conditions above and beyond majority consent for these laws to be legitimate. Majority consent is, as it were, only a necessary condition for legitimate government activity for such activity must still follow natural laws (and more of this below. Note that here Locke is going some way to satisfying condition '#2.4' in figure 1.1 above). Thus, regardless of consent, laws must fulfil three additional criteria. Firstly, they must be 'common' (II, 9, §124). This means that laws must be general enough to apply to all equally, and must be easily

known, accessible, and as regular as possible. Secondly, they must be arbitrated by an indifferent, third-person judge (II, 9, §125) to ensure fairness and equality. And finally, they must be well enforced (again, by a third-party organisation) (II, 9, §126).<sup>3</sup>

Thus, Locke has presented 1) a theory of the role of the government or the state, based on the origination of it as a voluntary establishment, 2) a description of the (albeit minimal) role of government, and what its primary functions are and 3) a theory of the political more generally (since Locke differentiates 'political' from 'non-political' entities).

The actual implementation of Locke's theory of the political and of his theory of government leads him to considerations of contingencies that the general theory of the political does not. How should we make sure that laws are commonly understood, for example? Perhaps by providing adequate translations to communities where a minority language or dialect is prevalent. This requires real-world knowledge of historical and geographical contingencies. Practical considerations about how a theory of government or a theory of the political could be implemented, given these contingencies, are 'political principles' (#3). Locke does not just limit himself to 'calling out' against political action or inactivity (i.e., only to developing 'negative political principles' #3.1). Locke also presents some examples of proposals that political entities could implement (i.e., 'positive political' principles '#3.2'), such as his requirement that the law be commonly understood by all. Locke's thought also leaves us with a detailed enough account of a theory of the political and of

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<sup>3</sup> That the consent of the majority is not a sufficient condition for a legitimate law is made, albeit quite ambiguously, later on in the text. Locke provides four reasons for justifiably opposing a magistrate's law. The law is illegitimate (my term: Locke's original is simply 'illegal') when the citizenries 'estates, liberties, and lives are in danger, and perhaps their religion too' (II, 18, §209). No mention of consent is made, implying it is not in itself a sufficient condition for providing laws that cannot be opposed.

government that a contemporary reader could still use it as a theoretical basis for suggesting positive political changes. Such a reader could, in fact, develop a manifesto of 'Lockean' positive political principles fit for contemporary times but systematically in-line with Locke's basic theoretical commitments. That is, we can develop a positive political programme from Locke's works.

A positive political programme might include principles, or at least guiding rules about how to apply Locke's general political theory *given the conditions* of, for example, 21<sup>st</sup> century England. Such a programme could provide guidelines to day-by-day adjustments to governmental bills and policies by uniting both Locke's general political theory with the real-time changes in various contingencies – interest rates, unemployment rates, social trends, and so on. It is also conceptually possible, however, that a political programme be given without any (unified or intentional at least) underlying theory of the political or even theory of government.

Locke's political programme is (mostly) a 'positive political programme'. A 'negative' political contribution could be where the problems of a current policy or form of government are highlighted, without necessarily offering the case for a practical alternative or workable change. A positive political statement, on the contrary, would be one which either actively seeks to avoid a given political situation; by suggesting the implementation of a new policy, or an amendment of an existing one, for example. A positive political programme may advise us how to put into practice general ontology, normative, or descriptive commitments, or a 'theory of government' or 'theory of the political', or some variation of these things, or neither.

A positive political programme need not necessarily be constructed from either (or both) of these latter two theories.

Locke provides us with a thorough account of a *positive* political programme. In order to understand the nature of a 'negative' policy, or a political programme that is not programmatic, however, we will have to temporarily abandon Locke's thought. An examination of another canonical political theorist, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, will help further elucidate characteristics of political policies that Locke's thought cannot.

### 1.1.2 Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Rousseau, it is often argued (e.g., Robinson, 1984; Schaeffer, 2012) takes a casuistic approach to specific aspects of a theory of government – namely, to what actual, positive principles any given government ought to enact.<sup>4</sup> Rousseau has an account of the human that is quite different from Locke's. If Locke's (let's call it 'static') view of the human is that they share certain universal facts, irrespective of social and historical facts, Rousseau's account is far more 'anthropological'. Since Rousseau believes that the characteristics of people are highly sensitive to environmental and historical facts, Rousseau believes that people are far more divergent than Locke

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<sup>4</sup> Rousseau appears to confirm this with his considerations on the most suitable form of government for Corsica. He writes there that the form of government is most appropriate for a citizenry ultimately depends on external factors such as the 'qualities in the nature and the soil of each country' (Rousseau, 2005, 127). I take this to refer to geographical facts, as well as historical and facts about how the people of a nation have been socialised. This would confirm his claim on the same page that the most suitable form of government is often 'the work of chance or fortune' rather than deliberate choice (*ibid.*). This view is also found in the *Social Contract*, where Rousseau's ideal lawgiver: "[...] does not [just] start by drafting laws that are good in themselves, but first examines whether the people for whom he destines them is suited to bear them" (Rousseau, 1999, 157).

allows for (see n.4 above). Hence, Rousseau thinks that policies must be sensitive to the citizenry that they are applied to, or else they may risk doing more inadvertent harm than good. That is not to say that governments will not recognise that there are some rather timeless and universal facts about humans. For Rousseau, these might include essential elements of human nature such as the fact that we have free-will and perfectibility (and are hence consequently also corruptible).<sup>5</sup> Other factors that policy makers ought to consider might, on the other hand, be far more contingent and short-lived than these former conditions. An example could be whether Geneva has the requisite social and economic conditions to support a theatre or not.

Rousseau therefore does not (and indeed cannot, due to the restrictions of his own theory of the political, and theory of government) provide a *full-fledged* account of a positive political programme that could be enacted in *any* situation. But Rousseau does not leave us entirely in the dark either. Rousseau provides such a thorough anthropological account and theory of the political that we might nevertheless have enough details to quite confidently reconstruct positive policies that are faithful to most, if not all of Rousseau's central theoretical commitments. Rousseau's theory of the political might even be *especially* useful for contemporary application; because it provides political principles that can be applied in many varying times and circumstances. Despite the fact that Rousseau favours a casuistic approach to answering questions about which policies ought to be advocated at a specific time and place, Rousseau nevertheless leaves sufficient details for a contemporary reader to apply aspects of his theoretical commitments to guiding policy-making. Hence, I suggest that Rousseau develops a *theoretical basis* for deciding how political entities

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<sup>5</sup> Note that Rousseau's views about the nature of humans form part of a general ontology (#1) that informs his theory of the political. In fact, as I interpret Rousseau, it is his 'non-political' anthropology that ultimately leads to a theory of the political that rather starkly rivals Locke's.

should be practically arranged in real-world situations, i.e., for positive political policies. Yet these same theoretical commitments simultaneously ensure that Rousseau does not and cannot provide a *substantive* positive policy *programme*.

I have interpreted Rousseau as an essentially casuistic theorist with regards to positive policy suggestions. Despite this particular theoretical commitment, Rousseau still has much to say about the nature of politics and of human beings. Such theoretical commitments, though they fail to provide an explicit and universally applicable positive political programme, can still be informative in providing general political recommendations that would apparently be applicable to any society. When it comes to specific policy suggestions, however, we must look at each society individually. Therefore, Rousseau leaves us with theoretical guidelines about how to effectively govern human beings given their nature, but does not offer us a full-fledged programme for positive policy implementations that could be applied to any age.

Nevertheless, because a reader can potentially develop policies that are faithful to Rousseau's theoretical commitments, including his theory of the political and theory of government, I argue that Rousseau provides us with the *theoretical foundation* for a programme of positive policy change. Rousseau might not explicitly articulate a fully-fledged account of how we ought to arrange political entities, but he does at least provide us with the sufficient theoretical means to do so. It is *this* contribution that warrants us in considering Rousseau to be a political theorist. (Note that Rousseau satisfies conditions #3.1 and #3.5, as well as #2.1 in the taxonomy above.)



Hence a political theorist might be a thinker who presents a theory of the political as well as a positive policy program. Yet I would suggest that to be considered a political theorist one only needs to provide a comprehensive enough *theoretical foundation* for developing policy alterations in differing social and historical conditions. Given the nature of policy alterations, I suspect that defending some kind of theory of the political would also be a necessary requirement; to inform us, for example, of when state coercion is legitimate and when it is not. The important conclusion for this thesis, however, is that canonical *political theorists* such as Rousseau and Locke are recognised as such because they, where Kierkegaard *does not*, provide us with a sufficient enough theoretical basis for making positive policy alterations. Hence, I will not argue that Kierkegaard is a 'political theorist'. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard is certainly far from uninterested in political affairs and ought to be, as I shall go on to argue, rightfully considered as a 'theorist of the political'. Before this argument can be forwarded, however, it would be beneficial to engage in some further clarification of the analytic framework we set out above (in figure 1.1).

## 1.2 Theory of the political and ontology.

In the examinations of the above theorists, we have highlighted some aspects of 'political policies' (#3). Clearly, however, Locke's description of positive and programmatic policies does not exhaust his political contribution. For one thing, more background work can be made (and indeed, *is* made by Locke) to explain why government is needed *at all*. An important part of Locke's argument is that the

establishment of a government is voluntary. This claim is far from uncontroversial; yet Locke's justification for it also importantly informs his political thought.

Thomas Hobbes [1588-1679] had argued that the establishment of government was more of a rational necessity than a voluntary choice. Other political thinkers might argue that the original inception of the establishment of government was an event that, whilst perhaps necessarily remedial to the conditions of an archaic era, is now not only unnecessary but perhaps even a *hindrance* to present-day society.<sup>6</sup> Thus, many of Locke's claims about the origins of the establishment of government, and even of the pre-political state of affairs that preceded the latter, also inform aspects of his political thought. In what follows, I hope to examine this relationship more precisely.

Much of what is of specifically 'political' worth in Locke's principal political work, *The Two Treatises of Government*, is not obviously a *prima facie* account of positive policies, or a theory of government. Locke spends much time and effort elucidating topics such as human nature and moral matters. Humans, for Locke, are essentially beings with the capacity to be rational and to produce. Locke does not see these traits as inherent within us without reason: humans are supposed to (we may say, designed to) deduce what the improvement of their earthly life would entail, and to reify that vision through laborious alterations to nature. This is the basis for our God-given, natural right to property (II, 5, §§26, 31, and 32). Locke argues that other animals are part of 'the commons'. As such, they are part of the material which can become the property of a human. Hence, Locke's theory of property also makes a value-laden

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<sup>6</sup>Again, whether or not a specific political theorist *has* argued this (i.e., whether or not Karl Marx [1818-1883] could and should be read in this way) is not relevant here. The point is simply to highlight that a range of differing accounts of the origination of government can clearly be given as alternatives to Locke's.

distinction between human and non-human creatures. Finally, Locke also makes comments about what the relations between human beings are like. Locke argues that each human being is a creature of God and must be treated as such. Hence we cannot destroy ourselves or each other as we are also God's property (II, 2, §6). This informs a theory of the natural sociability between humans that exists both prior to and after the establishment of government.

As this discussion has shown, much of what comes to inform Locke's political position is theological or otherwise 'non-political' in nature. 'Natural laws', for example, a key component of Locke's *political* thought, are given to us by God and according to His will (II, 2, §8). Nevertheless, it is also undeniable that Locke's *theological* commitments end up being *politically* relevant as well. The former inform Locke's notion of natural law, and hence frame his political enterprise.

As we have seen, Locke provides a broad but in-depth account of the ontological status of many aspects of human life, political and non-political alike, as well as the proper relations between them. Locke's ontology deals with a number of entities that are, at least *prima facie* not necessarily political at all (as I will argue shortly). Locke's ontology includes, for example, a description of how it is that humans are social, and what it is for a human life to fare well. But Locke's ontology also involves an explanation of subjects that can more obviously be translated into political principles. For example, it might explain when the use of power can be permissibly exerted by some human beings over others (if ever).

To give a fuller analysis of Locke's ontology, I will pursue an increasingly popular reading of Locke which argues that he was first and foremost interested in theological commitments. According to this reading, Locke's theological commitments, whilst not political in and of themselves, nevertheless completely inform his political thought. To what extent these commitments should therefore be called 'political' commitments at all will be assessed. Furthermore, I will explore what it means to ground one's political thought in theological concerns, as well as whether this should affect our judgement of such a thinker as a 'theorist of the political', or 'political theorist', or not.

### 1.3 Locke: Politics and Theology.

#### Introduction

In the following section I shall attempt to engage in some conceptual clarification in area of political thought that I think leads to some misunderstandings regarding political thought in general, but Kierkegaard's political thought more specifically.<sup>7</sup> This confusion revolves around whether a theorist is primarily theological or political. It also brings up questions about whether we can justifiably term a body of thought a 'theory of the political', or a 'political theory', even if that theory is primarily grounded in (a) non-political commitment(s). The following section will also therefore help to clarify more specifically what I mean by 'theory of the political'.

Once again, I shall examine John Locke as an example of a familiar and well recognised political thinker. I shall, however, pursue a reading of Locke that takes his works, his political thought included, to be the result of a primary interest in biblical interpretation.<sup>8</sup> I shall conclude that even if Locke's theory of the political, and

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<sup>7</sup> I shall use the more general term 'political thought' whenever political aspects of Kierkegaard's thought: 1) have not yet been identified by the taxonomy above (in figure 1.1) by either myself or by another author, or; 2) involve various differing concepts from the taxonomy above, or; 3) cannot adequately be surmised by one or more of the concepts above.

<sup>8</sup> The literature for (and against) this position is vast. As such, I shall redirect the reader to four recent works which detail and in some cases assess the most prominent defenders of the view that Locke is engaged in 'political theology'. All in all, the following four references cite fifteen prominent and contemporary Locke theorists that defend this position (in multiple different works): Corbett, 2012, p. 27, n.2; De Roover & Balagangadhara, 2008, pp. 545-56, notes 4, 5, & 6; Myers, 1995, p. 630, n.2; and Schwartzman, 2005, p. , n.1. The same works also assess the equally prominent but opposing position: that Locke designed his political thought so that it could be defended on entirely secular grounds. In what follows, I will primarily concern myself with Joshua Mitchell's recent articulation of the 'Locke as political theology' position.

political theory are grounded in primary theological commitments, the latter does not detract from the former. In other words, having primary theological ('non-political') commitments that necessarily inform one's political thought does not warrant us in claiming that the latter cannot therefore be considered as defending a theory of the political, or a political theory.

This is important because I take Kierkegaard's theory of the political to be very similar to the theologically grounded theory of the political that this prominent interpretation of Locke - as 'political theology' - does. Hence, an examination of Locke's views as 'political theology' should draw a parallel between Locke's already well-known political views and the far less mainstream account of Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political that I will defend.

### 1.3.1 Locke as 'political theology'.

Locke, we had briefly noted above, makes many assertions that appear to be theological. We have a right to property because God designed us in such a way that we could improve our earthly existence by exerting labour over nature (II, 5, §§26, 31-32). We have a right to punish others only insofar as they have violated God's good will (II, 2, §§6-8), etc.

In fact, we could see *all* of Locke's political thought as an exercise in attempting to enforce God's will on earth (albeit Locke's God is somewhat non-denominational). It

could therefore be argued that what Locke is doing in his most ostensibly political works (e.g., the 'Two Treatises of Government' and 'A Letter Concerning Toleration') is in fact first and foremost theological. Many Locke scholars have argued for this (or a very similar) position (see n.8 above). Joshua Mitchell, for example, argues that 'Locke's position is best understood as political theology'.<sup>9</sup> By this, Mitchell means that Locke's political endeavours are an attempt at interpreting what the Bible decrees our place on Earth is (after the Fall but before the Final Judgment), and what we can and ought to do to put the scriptures into practice. In this 'interim' (Mitchell's term) 'The human task before God is [...] to establish government that respects the self' (Mitchell, 1996, 97).

For our interests, however, we need not worry about whether Mitchell's novel reading is a correct and faithful interpretation of John Locke's works and intentions or not. What now concerns us is the following: *if* Mitchell's reading is correct then would John Locke still warrant the title 'political theorist'; or 'theorist of the political'?

For the sake of investigating this question let us suppose that Mitchell is correct that Locke's primary interest was theological. Let us suppose that Locke was embroiled in biblical interpretation because he was first and foremost concerned with finding out what God's will was and how God desired His will to be practised on earth. On this reading, Locke's political theory and principles would be secondary interests derived from these primary, theological ones. Locke might even posit certain political principles for the sake of an interest that is not *prima facie* political at all. Thus, Locke might think that the government ought to reform a certain bill - e.g., one concerning

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<sup>9</sup> Mitchell, 1996, 73. Mitchell's term 'political theology' (or at least my understanding of it) will be developed in more detail in what follows.

religious dress-code - because it jeopardises what Locke interprets to be a more important, theological concern - e.g., the God-given right that each individual has for the catering of his or her soul. (Incidentally, this does appear to be Locke's position in *On Toleration*, at least). Let us suppose that all of Locke's canonical political contributions follow from primary theological commitments and are ultimately framed by them. Let us also still assume that the political principles that we had attributed to Locke above are maintained, but are derivative from, and answerable to, primary theological commitments. The question that now remains is: "Would interpreting Locke as engaged in 'political theology' be sufficient evidence for the belief that his thought now no longer defends a 'political theory', or a 'theory of the political'?"

According to our initial taxonomy above (figure 1.1) having a primary theological commitment does not make a difference to the theoretical content of either a 'political theory', or a 'theory of the political'. Perhaps, one might retort, this only highlights a limitation in the taxonomy. Whether or not this is the case, we can still meaningfully ask: *should* the Locke of Mitchell's political theology cease to be regarded as a political theorist or a theorist of the political?

One argument in favour of thinking that Mitchell's reading of Locke ought no longer to be considered political theory might be because this theological Locke is no longer *primarily* concerned with the political. We might argue that such a reading presents a picture of Locke as now only a theologian that *perchance* happens to have some political principles. We might also argue that this political theologian is precisely 'apolitical' because Locke's principles would become only secondarily or *incidentally*



political. The motivating force behind any recommended political change would be a commitment to something that is altogether outside of the political, i.e., the theological (or more specifically for Mitchell, scriptural interpretation). Take our example of fighting against a dress-code for the sake of the salvation of the soul in our previous example. Such a 'policy' is only political in a derivative sense. According to a theological interpretation of Locke, he is (no longer) primarily interested in securing civic liberties or political rights. The 'dress-code policy' of Locke as political theology now appears to be a specifically religious interest that just happens to have political ramifications.

We can take this conceptual clarification a step further. Suppose for the sake of argument that the political realm has in fact been well ordered by civil servants for the sake of maximising civil liberties. Assume that there were no theological considerations at all in the ordering of the political realm. Suppose, furthermore, that the regulations of the political realm are such that they do not conflict with the biblical interpretation of Locke's political theology. If such a state of affairs were to come about we might think that the theologically-inspired Locke of the interpretation we have been pursuing would no longer have *anything* politically interesting to say. Given Mitchell's understanding of Locke, Locke might afford us with biblical justifications to condone the way we have ordered our political affairs – but it is at least possible that such justifications could have been independently afforded to us by strictly civil and secular considerations of rights and welfare. The union of the theological reasoning and the secular would be a neat (but unintended) coincidence.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Mitchell's reading of Locke as political theology implies, however, that Locke would see the potential unification of the theological and the secular world not as coincidental but as designed. Below I pursue a hypothetical reading of Locke which is 'prioritarian' – it argues that theological

In such a situation it would appear as if Locke's political theology is purely restricted to ensuring that theological commitments are not disturbed by civic ones. But we might then worry about considering this political theology a political *theory*. For it would appear is if this reading of Locke as political theology could only grant remedial, interventionist policies. Furthermore, these principles would be based on interests that are, *prima facie* at least, different to interests in the political *per se*. Finally, having remedial or interventionist political principles does not in and of itself necessitate having either a theory of the political or a political theory (as our taxonomy above - and perhaps our intuitions too - also suggest).

Remedial political principles typically take the form of hypothetical imperatives. If you want to achieve 'x' (which may not be *prima facie* political) you have to do 'y' (which might be *prima facie* political, and vice-versa). Such remedial interventions might not rely on a working *theory* of the political. Sometimes all that is needed is knowledge of empirical data: if you want unemployment to fall then, given all of the empirical facts about the current state of the economy, you would be best to do 'x' – or to adopt 'policy y'. Generally speaking, remedial interventions do work with some kind of theory of the political: but they need not, and even when they do, they might work with a bare, general, and possibly logically inconsistent one.

Remedial interventions cannot in and of themselves supply us with a general *theory*. A remedial intervention only seeks to make a single change using whatever means are afforded at the particular time. Once that alteration has been made the justification for

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commitments are *primary* to political ones. I must emphasise that this is not Mitchell's understanding of Locke as political theology.

that change can disappear along with the problem. We need not be left with anything of lasting, theoretical substance that we could apply to other times and places. Remedial interventions alone, even if we were to catalogue an entire manifesto of coherent ones, would not necessarily give us a theoretical framework with which to use beyond their immediate case(s).

Coming back to our original example, we might think that Mitchell's interpretation of Locke as political theology actually lacks a political theory because Locke's theological justification for a given way of doing politics might become redundant in the face of civic, secular justifications. Locke's political theology would then only serve the purpose of providing remedial political principles. Having political principles is not a sufficient condition for having a theory of the political. Furthermore, an involvement in the political realm might be seen as an unwanted but necessary by-product of Locke's not obviously political (here theological) concerns.

Locke's Biblical interpretation might lead him to suggest a particular political change. Still, might we not worry that once this concern had been resolved so would Locke's involvement in political affairs? If remedial (theological) interests were the only reasons for Locke-as-political-theologian to become involved in political affairs then wouldn't we be left with no real long-standing theory of the political (or political theory)?

It is clear, however, that even given Mitchell's theological understanding of Locke's politics, Locke *would* still have long-term theoretical interests guiding his political thought. These interests might not be primarily political. The involvement in politics

might also be an unwelcome but necessary evil, derived from the wish to keep one's primary, non-political interests sanctified. Furthermore, such interests might be expressly admitted as not properly belonging to the class of the political at all. Kierkegaard, for example, would explicitly argue that religious interests are, properly speaking, non-political by nature. Nevertheless, a theory about how the political and the non-political ought to relate and about how each ought to respect the legitimate regions and actions of the other is, I contend, an integral part of a theory of the political. Such a theory has long-lasting value - beyond any immediate instantiation of its specific application. For such a theory provides justifications for *always* ensuring that the relation between the political and the non-political are recognised and sanctified. Particular, remedial cases only serve as useful examples of exactly how the political and the non-political can fall out of unison, and perhaps of the dangers and solutions experienced if they do. In other words, rather than being necessarily short-lived, remedial political interventions can highlight an underlying theory of the political.

I contend that an understanding of Locke's thought as political theology would still justify us in calling Locke a theorist of the political.<sup>11</sup> To be justifiably considered as a theorist of the political, given the conceptual clarification I have been engaging with, one must only have to provide a long-lasting, theoretical justification of how the political and the non-political authentically relate. Holding a non-political commitment, even if one prioritises it above the political, is not enough justification for deeming that thinker to be 'apolitical', or one who does not have a genuine 'theory

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<sup>11</sup> I should also note that of those who have read as engaged in 'political theology' none, as far as I am aware, believe that this interpretation warrants us in ceasing to judge Locke a 'political theorist'. John Perry, on the contrary, frequently pairs the two, arguing that the former is *necessary* for our judgement of Locke as the latter (e.g.,: Perry, 2011, 13, 78, 81, 106, 117, 124-5, 206. That the two ought to be paired in this way is the central aim of his book, as explicated on p. 13).

of the political'. Defined in this way we can now also see why a theory of the political need not provide a clear and substantive positive political programme. (The theorist could leave it up to others more suitable to the task to do this, for example.)

I wish to note that Locke is not a particularly exceptional case in this regard. It has been argued that many theorists, including numerous who are canonically considered to be *political theorists*, have been interpreted as being engaged in the tradition of political theology. If these thinkers were in fact primarily concerned with theological commitments, the taxonomy I presented above would still give us grounds for acknowledging whether or not these theorists provide us with a new theory of the political, or political theory. Hence, theorists ranging from Socrates [469 BC – 399 BCE],<sup>12</sup> Saint Augustine [354 – 430],<sup>13</sup> Thomas Aquinas [1225 – 1274],<sup>14</sup> Thomas Hobbes [1588 – 1679],<sup>15</sup> Baruch Spinoza [1632 – 1677],<sup>16</sup> Giambattista Vico [1668 – 1744],<sup>17</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau [1712 – 1778],<sup>18</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville [1805 – 1859],<sup>19</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky [1821 – 1881],<sup>20</sup> Carl Schmitt [1888-1985],<sup>21</sup> and

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<sup>12</sup> See for example: Pangle, 2007, pp. 1-16. The textual evidence for this interpretation is Plato's *Apology* (37e-38a, cited in: *ibid.*, 1).

<sup>13</sup> See for example: Sandoz, 1972, 2 (original: Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 6.6, cited in: *ibid.*).

<sup>14</sup> See for example: Bauerschmidt, F., C., 2008, pp. 48-61; and Hoelzl, M., & Ward, G., 2006, pp. 37-48. (The textual evidence for this interpretation is: Aquinas, (excerpts from) *De regimine (De regno)*, cited in: *ibid.*).

<sup>15</sup> See for example: Pangle, 2007, 6; Hoelzl, M., & Ward, G., 2006, p. 107; and Sandoz, 1972, 2 (original: Hobbes, *De Cive*, (1642), cap. 15, art. 15; *id.*, *Leviathan* (1651), chs. 31, 32, and 42 to end, cited in: *ibid.*).

<sup>16</sup> See for example: de Vries, 2008, pp. 232-248; and Sandoz, 1972, 2 (original: Spinoza (d. 1677), *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, chs. 14, 16, 19, 20; and *Tractatus politicus*, chs. 3, 6.40, 8.46, cited in: *ibid.*).

<sup>17</sup> See for example: Sandoz, 1972, 2 (original: Vico, *New Science* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1744), pars. 334, 342, 360, 364, 366, 385, 390, 990, cited in: *ibid.*).

<sup>18</sup> See for example: Sandoz, 1972, 2 (original: Rousseau, *Du Contract Social* (1762), bk. 4, ch. 8, cited in: *ibid.*).

<sup>19</sup> See for example: Hoelzl, M., & Ward, G., 2006, pp. 149-160. The textual evidence for this interpretation is (excerpts from) *Democracy in America* (cited in: *ibid.*).

<sup>20</sup> See for example: Sandoz, 1978, pp. 648-674.

<sup>21</sup> See for example: Hollerich, 2008, pp. 107-122; and Hoelzl, M., & Ward, G., 2006, pp. 190-202. (Original: (excerpts from) Schmitt, *Political Theology*, cited in: *ibid.*).

Emmanuel Levinas [1906 – 1995],<sup>22</sup> (to name just a few) could be plausibly interpreted as engaging in political theology. Some of these theorists have, I think deservedly, been recognised as political theorists; some deservedly not; others perhaps undeservedly not. Given the fact that some canonical political theorists could be interpreted as primarily engaged in political theology, I would tentatively suggest that the justifications for terming a given theorist a ‘political theorist’ and/or a ‘theorist of the political’ do not lie in whether or not he or she has primary theological commitments or not, but simply whether the content of his or her thought outlines the respective theory or not. Hence, primary theological (or otherwise ‘non-political’) commitments are irrelevant in this respect.

I also want to note that even if one disagrees with the interpretation of John Locke (or any other of the canonical political theorists listed in the preceding paragraph) as one engaged in ‘political theology’ this does not affect my interest here. My aim here is to show why, all things being equal, a theory of political theology (fair representation of the views of Locke *et. al.*, or not) might still warrant being considered a theory of the political (if only certain conditions, such as those outlined in the taxonomy above, are satisfied). Giving only *secondary* importance to civil liberties, and/or believing them to be only grounded in primary *theological* interests does not imply that a theory of the political is not also presented. Whether Locke was first and foremost interested in protecting civil liberties or not – whether Locke personally thought of his project as a political one or a theological one – are historical facts that do not bear upon the theoretical content of Locke’s thought. Such facts do not rule out the possibility that

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<sup>22</sup> See for example: de Vries, 2008, pp. 232-248.

Locke provided a theory of the political. To disregard the latter in light of the former would be to commit a version of the genetic fallacy.

## 1.4 Kierkegaard's political contribution.

I believe that I can now situate where Kierkegaard's thought sits in this schema. Kierkegaard has primary interests in what he deems to be existential questions. A large part of this primary, existential commitment is with the religious way of life. Kierkegaard also believes (I shall argue in more detail throughout the thesis, but most specifically in chapter three) that the existential and the political are, properly speaking, logically distinct entities.

It must be admitted that the cases of Kierkegaard's political interventions, e.g., his defence of disestablishment, are so infrequent that one might (I think correctly) consider them to be merely remedial interventions. Nevertheless, I would argue that Kierkegaard's very limited political activity rests upon a *theory* of the political: i.e., a theory of what ought and ought not to be considered as legitimately political concerns; what the genuine scope of political power is; and how the political realm authentically relates to the non-political. Hence, Kierkegaard's remedial interventions into political topics are not short-lived or fragmentary but rather evidence a long-lasting and coherent theory of the political.

Kierkegaard's theory of the political describes what things are and ought to rightfully be considered political and what are not. Briefly put, Kierkegaard believes that some questions, or areas of life, can be answered quantitatively and some only qualitatively.



Kierkegaard believes that politics is exceptionally fit and justified in addressing quantitative matters. If politics attempts to solve problems that are essentially qualitative, however, it only causes disorder and potential harm. This textual evidence (examined further in chapter three) provides the justificatory force for my argument that Kierkegaard provides us with a theory of the political. With regards to some questions that other canonical political theorists pursue, such as how to successfully implement this theory of the political, I believe that Kierkegaard has little to contribute. This can be rather unnerving and may have led many to hastily assume that Kierkegaard ought to be considered an 'a-political' theorist. Yet I do not believe that this move is necessitated; and in the next chapter I will examine a case of this argument (2.3.), concluding that the charge is unwarranted.

To summarise then: I do not believe that Kierkegaard offers us a positive programme for policy change, nor even the theoretical basis for such a programme (i.e., I do not believe that Kierkegaard is a political theorist). I also do not hold that Kierkegaard offers us a substantive theory of government. Kierkegaard does not, for example, give a detailed account of what form of government (democratic, aristocratic, etc.) might best implement his existential interests. Finally, the primary thesis defended within this work is that Kierkegaard's theory of the political is based upon *existential* commitments – commitments which even Kierkegaard argues are non-political by nature. Nevertheless, despite the fact that these 'existential' commitments are not necessarily political concerns, non-political commitments can be wholly informative of, and inextricably tied to a theory of the political. We developed this argument above with the case of a theological reading of Locke's politics (1.2). I believe that this is just the case with Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's existential concerns wholly

inform his theory of the political, without detracting from the theoretical content of the former. In short, my argument is that Kierkegaard is a theorist of the political, but not a political theorist.

Here, however, a few things are in need of qualification. Firstly, we have stated that Kierkegaard's theory of the political is wholly based upon his existentialist interests. These interests, furthermore, are in-and-of-themselves apolitical and ought to be kept so - according to Kierkegaard's own testimony. One more caveat in Kierkegaard's thought can now be highlighted. Kierkegaard, I shall argue in more depth below (chapter three for example), does not think that existential issues can even *conceivably* be solved by the establishment of a positive political programme. For whilst Kierkegaard believes that truly political concerns can be resolved by properly political means (such as majority vote for example), properly political means cannot conceivably solve existential concerns. To put it another way, existential concerns are of a qualitatively different nature to political means. The latter has no positive effect on the former. Hence, Kierkegaard's existentially motivated theory of the political is such that it could not even plausibly ever offer a substantive programme of positive policies.<sup>23</sup> I believe that it is even conceptually impossible to *reconstruct* such a programme from Kierkegaard's works whilst remaining faithful to the theoretical commitments of the latter. (As we saw above, this was not even the case with a casuistic reading of Rousseau. This is why I believe that Kierkegaard cannot properly speaking be considered a 'political theorist'.)

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<sup>23</sup> According to my reading of Kierkegaard then, he did not just accidentally fail to provide sufficient details for a programme of positive policy-making – rather, he *could not* provide such details due to the theoretical restrictions of his theory of the political.

The second qualification I want to make, however, is that this by no means restricts the politically informative nature of Kierkegaard's thought. The examination of other political theorists above aimed to highlight this. A theory of the political is conceptually different and so separable from a theory of government and/or a positive political programme. If Kierkegaard lacks the latter two (as I believe he does) this does not imply that he therefore lacks a theory of the political – nor that he lacks any political contribution whatsoever.

On the contrary (and thirdly), Kierkegaard's theory of the political is not insignificant. Kierkegaard's radically challenging political thought could serve as a constant impetus for re-evaluating contemporary ways of theorising about the political. Furthermore, a central task of this thesis is that Kierkegaard's theory of the political is non-trivially responsive to external change (chapters four through seven).

Kierkegaard's theory of the political provides us with justifications for seeing certain policies as illegitimate. Furthermore, Kierkegaard uses his theory of the political to fight for political reform in some of his later writings. Hence, whilst Kierkegaard does not (and cannot) provide a positive political programme, he does outline a theory of when and how fighting for 'negative' policy alterations are appropriate (#3.1). One example of such a case, the disestablishment of church and state in Denmark, will be examined in depth later in the thesis (chapter six). Kierkegaard, for the most part, believes that policy-making ought to be left to politicians (who ought to be, after all, experts in the area). Nevertheless, Kierkegaard does justify existentially-motivated political activism in the case where politicians are getting things wrong (again, this will be argued in detail in chapter six below). Kierkegaard's own, public polemic

against the marriage of church and state in Denmark during his times is a prime example of his willingness to use his authorship as a rallying cry for political change.

Finally, examining Kierkegaard's theory of the political is important because his account is both novel and timely. Kierkegaard's theory of the political is based upon his existentialist principles and thus affords us with a unique (and most likely, the first in-depth) existentially based theory of the political. Many political thinkers or activists work with a pre-established theory of the political (however vague and perhaps even logically inconsistent it may be). More often than not, these theories of the political are based on the efforts and works of political theorists or theorists of the political. What has often made these latter theorists historically noteworthy is their originality and (what often comes as a direct result) their ability to make us question anew our political ideologies and practices.

Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political allows us to do just this. Kierkegaard's original thought rejected both the growing liberal as well as the conservative ideology of his times (Kirmmse, 1998). The ideological views that Kierkegaard challenged in his times are undoubtedly different theories of the political than that of contemporary, western liberal democracies. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political also challenges many ideological commitments that are endorsed within the contemporary era. Thus, Kierkegaard's own theory of the political is not only novel but is of contemporary relevance because it contests the mainstream theory of the political that we work with today and that most of our political principles are based upon. Rather than basing a theory of the political upon maximising civic rights, Kierkegaard's theory of the political is framed by, and built

upon, a commitment to existential concerns. As such, much of Kierkegaard's existential literature which is often considered as politically disinterested should actually be seen as contributing to his unique theory of the political.

Some of the confusion with the concepts that have been clarified here could account for why the reception of Kierkegaard's works has, historically speaking, frequently judged it to be non-political. If I am to argue against this trend and show that Kierkegaard does in fact develop a theory of the political it will be necessary for me to account for this one-sided reception. Historically speaking, Kierkegaard's works have not been judged apolitical simply because Kierkegaard's theory of the political was not recognised - although I do think that this has played a significant part. The majority of the reception of Kierkegaard has instead argued that Kierkegaard's philosophy is essentially individualistic and anti-social.

I will take into consideration the charge that Kierkegaard's philosophy is essentially *anti* or *unsocial* later on in the thesis (section 6.3; and chapter seven). Nevertheless, there is another key reason for thinking that Kierkegaard's political thought is deficient, a reason that specifically marks contemporary Kierkegaard scholarship. This reason stems from a potential confusion of concepts. I believe that contemporary scholars have frequently failed to see that Kierkegaard developed a theory of the political. What often fuels this mistake, however, is that Kierkegaard's political thought is mistakenly judged as a political theory. *Qua* political theory, I think that it is fair to say that Kierkegaard's political contribution is indeed deficient. To dismiss Kierkegaard's entire political contribution on these grounds, however, is to throw out much of Kierkegaard's thought that is valuable; including his theory of the political.

As I understand it, some of the contemporary literature on Kierkegaard's political contribution has in effect judged Kierkegaard's theory of the political *as a political theory* and, finding that given these criteria it fails, has mistakenly deemed Kierkegaard's political thought to be defective.

An examination of the contemporary reception of Kierkegaard's politics in light of the distinctions made in this chapter is thus in order. I will argue that the problem of not distinguishing a political theory, a political programme, and a theory of the political, has been the bane of much contemporary Kierkegaard scholarship. The following chapter therefore seeks to address some of the criticisms that have recently been made against Kierkegaard's political thought in general. After this reception has been outlined, I will give the textual support for arguing that Kierkegaard should in fact be considered as a theorist of the political (chapter three).

## CHAPTER TWO:

### Kierkegaard's Politics and Contemporary Reception

#### Introduction.

The first one-hundred and twenty years of Kierkegaard reception scarcely found anything politically interesting in Kierkegaard's entire oeuvre. (Quite the opposite view, in fact, has frequently been drawn – that Kierkegaard is an apolitical or even anti-political theorist). The one-hundred and twenty year readership of Kierkegaard's views spans from Kierkegaard's immediate contemporaries to recent Kierkegaard scholars. That such an extensive audience finds nothing political in Kierkegaard's thought demands an explanation.

Historically speaking, there have been two different ways that this claim has been justified. The first reason for thinking Kierkegaard to be apolitical, individualistic, asocial, or even anti-social/political, has to do with the philosophical content of Kierkegaard's thought. Kierkegaard's philosophical emphasis on that 'single individual' and his apparent disdain for community and political reform have often been taken as evidence that Kierkegaard is a misanthrope; and this misanthropy is thought to be at the heart of his philosophical (and hence social and political) beliefs. I

will address this charge in many forms throughout this thesis (but especially in chapter seven below).

A brief response to this claim is that, historically speaking, such interpretations have frequently relied on unfaithful and incomplete translations of Kierkegaard's works (and most importantly, his more socially and politically oriented ones). Yet magnificent advances in the quality and quantity of Kierkegaard's texts into mainstream languages has characterised the contemporary reception of Kierkegaard scholarship. Despite this, there are still many contemporary Kierkegaard scholars who do not consider Kierkegaard's works to contain anything more politically substantial than fragmentary comments (however insightful they might admit the latter to be).

This, then, is the second (and historically more recent) way in which Kierkegaard's political contribution has been called into doubt. Generally speaking, the contemporary interpretation of the political aspect of Kierkegaard's authorship has suffered from lack of conceptual clarity.<sup>24</sup> So, for example, a chief reason for believing that Kierkegaard only has fragmented political 'principles' is that he lacked a positive political programme. A charge made by another scholar is that Kierkegaard's work must be considered 'a-political' because Kierkegaard's theory of the political is grounded in commitments that are not properly speaking 'political' entities.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> I shall state what I mean by the 'modern' reception presently below. (Nevertheless, I should point out that in no place in this thesis does the term 'modern' refer to the historical period 'modernity'.)

<sup>25</sup> This charge will be examined below in section 2.3. Note also that Garff uses the term 'a-political' rather than the closely linked 'apolitical'. The difference between these terms is also explained below (see n.32 below).



Given the taxonomy above, I argue that these charges are frequently unwarranted. We have already hinted at the idea that one can have a theory of the political without necessarily also providing a positive political programme, for example. If Kierkegaard does develop a novel theory of the political (to be argued in chapter three below) then it should be conceded that he not only gives us more than just fragmentary political principles, but that he also leaves us with a theory that is of contemporary value.

Hence in what follows I shall assess what I call the 'modern' reception of Kierkegaard's political thought. I shall examine what I take to be the chief arguments for the view that Kierkegaard does not give us a substantial theory of the political and in doing so I will situate my own view within this scholarship. I should note that I will often agree with claims and even some of the charges that contemporary scholars have levelled against Kierkegaard; including, for example, that Kierkegaard leaves us with no positive political programme. Where I differ from such scholars, however, is in the subsequent view that this loss creates a deficiency with regards to Kierkegaard's political contribution.

Before assessing the literature of these 'modern' Kierkegaard scholars I will briefly mention some defining features of what I call the 'modern' period of Kierkegaard research.

## 2.1 The 'Modern' Period.

From 1967 onwards, Howard and Edna Hong began publishing Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers* [hereafter simply; JP]. From the 20 volumes of Journals and Papers available in Danish, 'the Hong's' would come to publish six volumes of selections of these into English, with a seventh volume as an index. The project came to completion in 1978. All seven volumes published by Indiana University Press. From 1980 onwards, the Hong's then went on to publish a twenty-six volume 'Kierkegaard's Writings' series, which consisted of what could be considered as all of Kierkegaard's 'stand-alone' books, based again on the Danish originals. The twenty-six volume publication was completed in May, 2000, with the publication of a *Cumulative Index to Kierkegaard's Writings*, volume XXVI.

All in all this unified, thirty-three volume collection, filled with cross-references, supplementary materials, introductions and extensive footnotes, is magisterial. To want more than is available in English would imply a level of interest or scholarship that would necessitate one to read the originals in Danish anyway. As a friend of the late Hong's commented, we can put the scope of this project 'negatively': '[...] there are no uniform translations of the works of Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche or Heidegger. But we do have a uniform translation into English of the enormous output of Kierkegaard' (Elveton, 2009, 68).

In the editor's note to the translations of the journals, we are told that the Hongs consulted and cross-checked their translations with other scholars throughout the world.<sup>26</sup> 'In this way', we are further told, 'the multiplicity of judgments has served as mutual corroboration and extension of selection' (Hong, H. & Hong, E., 1967, xix). Early translations of Kierkegaard simply could not engage in an international level of collaboration and cross-referencing available to modern translators. Additionally, the Hongs also set up an editorial committee that decided which English words (or expressions) were best suited to the Danish originals.<sup>27</sup> The absence of the availability of such an internationally prestigious level of translation could account for some of the misunderstandings in the early reception of Kierkegaard's authorship. However imperfect earlier translations and understandings of Kierkegaard's works might have been, however, they still played an important formative role in contemporary translations (as footnote 26 suggests).

Howard and Edna Hong cheerfully referred to the journals and papers as 'the key to the scriptures' (i.e., to Kierkegaard's other works) (*ibid.*, xxii). Whilst this might be a little optimistic, it is certainly true that Kierkegaard's unpublished, personal comments on, for example, his church attack have allowed scholars to understand his thought at a deeper level than previously available. What Kierkegaard says in private

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<sup>26</sup> Among those collaborated with include: Emanuel Hirsch, Niels Thulstrup, Torsten Bohlin, Per Lønning, Gregor Malantschuk, Paul Holmer, Edward Geismar, Reidar Thomte, David Swenson, Walter Lowrie, Howard Johnson, T. H. Croxall, Leo Sjestov, Regis Jolivet, Helge Ukkola, Johannes Sløk, James Collins, Valter Lindstrom, and Per Wagndal. Among the works of scholars used but not collaborated with include 'Hayo Gerdes, Peter Rohde, Knud Ferlov, Jean J. Gateau and Cornelio Fabro for the judgment and knowledge embodied in their multivolume editions of selections from the *Papirer* in current German, Danish, French, and Italian editions of selections' (Hong, H. & Hong, E., 1967, xix).

<sup>27</sup> Roger Poole, incidentally, thinks that this tactic is perhaps the translations only flaw. This is due to the fact that Kierkegaard often used the same key term in multiple contexts. Translating a term into one fixed English word (or phrase) risks losing the plasticity that one could gain if the term was instead translated anew with each varying context consulted (Poole, 1998, 61). Poole raises a good point. Whilst I shall rely on the translations of the Hongs for the most part, I will also consult scholarly debates of key terms and their potential ambiguities. Throughout the thesis, I shall attempt to cite the Danish originals of key phrases in parentheses.

about his politically minded published works is intriguing and has afforded many contemporary scholars a closer understanding of Kierkegaard's political position.

The modern period is marked by a high quality of both Kierkegaard scholarship and study materials, as well as an international collaboration between scholars at a level that has never been available before. And yet, even amongst present day scholars working on Kierkegaard's political thought who are adequately armed with the material needed for such an endeavour, there are still those who deny Kierkegaard has anything politically relevant to say. In fact, even amongst those who think Kierkegaard has a valuable political contribution there is still widespread disagreement as to what exactly that contribution is. The arguments of some of these modern Kierkegaard scholars will be the focus of the following sub-section.

## 2.2 Kierkegaard's lack of a positive political programme.

### Introduction

The charge that Kierkegaard ought not to be considered political because he offers us no positive policy is initially plausible. For if Kierkegaard indeed has no recommendations for an actual policy, why should we consider him to be a political thinker at all? What use is Kierkegaard's 'political thought' if it fails to help us decide what actual policies we might establish?

Many scholars recognise that Kierkegaard's thought frequently contains a social or political *aspect*. Of those who do, it must be admitted that not many explicitly comment on the role that positive political decisions play in Kierkegaard's authorship. This limited response is perhaps itself a sign that Kierkegaard has little to nothing to say on the issue. Nevertheless, the response to Kierkegaard's lack of concern for *policy making* is frequently negative – perhaps even rather unduly so. Most scholars lament the fact that Kierkegaard fails to leave us with an account of a political programme. But many also see this absence as a 'deficiency' in Kierkegaard's political thought, rather than an integral and necessary aspect of it.

I shall state my affiliations and differences with this literature here in brief. I agree with most scholars that Kierkegaard does indeed fail to leave us with positive policies. However, I disagree with most in that I refuse to see this as lamentable, as a

deficiency, or even as accidental. In fact, I argue in the remainder of this thesis that Kierkegaard's refusal to map out how his theory of the political could be translated into positive policies was intentional (primarily argued in chapter three; but also partly in chapters five and six). I shall argue that Kierkegaard's quietism with regards to external policy-making is an integral part of his theory of the political. I believe that much of the scholarship that evaluates Kierkegaard's political contribution fails to recognise that Kierkegaard's novel theory of the political gives him reasons for not ascribing positive policy changes. Thus my position in the literature is to accept that Kierkegaard has no positive political programme, but to reject the claim that this is a deficiency in the totality of his political thought. Since this integral aspect of Kierkegaard's thought is partly responsible for its theoretical novelty, Kierkegaard's refusal to provide a positive programme for policy change could even be seen as something of a prodigious insight.

Despite the fact that nearly every scholar finds the lack of positive political programme lamentable there is certainly a spectrum of opinions with regards to how detrimental to his political contribution this might be. This spectrum is rather continuous, making it relatively hard to categorise the opinions into specific groups. Nevertheless, there are some meaningful distinctions to be made. Firstly, some scholars are sympathetic to the idea that a positive political theory can be *reconstructed* from, and in line with, Kierkegaard's authorship. The fact that Kierkegaard himself did not do this is a little lamentable: but this scholarship takes the view that it is not hard for a contemporary reader to fill this gap in and so the absence does not have serious consequences with regards to the on-going value of

Kierkegaard's political thought. I shall call these views 'sympathisers' of Kierkegaard's political thought.

Many other scholars agree with the 'sympathisers' that Kierkegaard lacks a positive political programme but are less optimistic about the project of reconstructing one. Many also reproach Kierkegaard for not himself providing such an account. After all, given Kierkegaard's complete absence of considerations for positive political suggestions won't all attempts at 'reconstructing' such a programme ultimately boil down to guesswork, and to the interpretations of differing scholars? Given that Kierkegaard only leaves scant comments with regards to positive political changes can we really use Kierkegaard's thought to try and find solutions for combatting real-world political problems - or should we not just turn elsewhere? Kierkegaard, it is assumed, could have dispelled these interpretive problems if he had provided more information on what kinds of policies he would have condoned; in absence of this we are left with unresolvable hermeneutical problems.

Furthermore, Kierkegaard's own writings are often highly critical of attempts at even *providing* positive political programmes. Thus, it is questionable whether Kierkegaard would have condoned *any* 'reconstruction' of a positive political programme from his works. If this sentiment is indeed true, then no reconstructed programme for political change could be considered as completely faithful to Kierkegaard's authorship.

Such nuances in opinions ought to be kept in mind as I proceed to evaluate the wide-ranging opinions on Kierkegaard's lack of political suggestions. In a general way, however, I shall start with those who see a lack of political programme in

Kierkegaard's work as not too notable a loss before examining those who see this absence as evidence of the fact that Kierkegaard's political thought is ultimately deficient beyond salvage.

### 2.2.1 Lack of a positive political programme – a sympathetic approach.

Even sympathetic readers of Kierkegaard's political thought lament what they take to be his indifference with regards to external political changes. Examples include Robert Perkins and Merold Westphal. Perkins particularly regrets the fact that Kierkegaard neglected to give a positive account of politics since he not only thinks that such an account would have been entirely consistent with Kierkegaard's political thought but even argues that the latter *entails* the former. Perkins argues that a faithful reading of Kierkegaard's existentially authentic individual necessarily results in an individual 'evoked' into '[...] political and social activism' (Perkins, 1997, 154). So resolute is Perkins' belief that a truly authentic Kierkegaardian individual ought to practise 'heroic effort for worldly change', that he suggests a reading against Kierkegaard's own, judging Kierkegaard's own political quietism as 'a serious short-coming' (*ibid.*).

Perkins does not seem to be alone in this regard. Stephen Crites, for example, has convincingly argued that the apparently individualistic outlook of one of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms (Anti-Climacus) in the work *Sickness Unto Death* [hereafter simply; SUD] is unjustified and so ought to be ignored. Crites notices that a



social reading of the text is entirely consistent with the philosophical arguments forwarded in *SUD*, and therefore that the pseudonym's own individualistic conclusions present a philosophically unjustified bias (Crites, 1992, 150-151). One might object that the work was written under a pseudonym, and therefore says nothing about any individualistic biases *Kierkegaard* might have harboured.

Two things complicate the issue, however. The first is that the work was almost printed in Kierkegaard's own name, a fact which Crites is well aware of (*ibid.*, 145. See also: JP VI, 6517). Crites also recognises that Kierkegaard considered the pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, to be an 'exemplary' Christian. The teachings of *SUD* are so strict in adherence to the Christianity of the New Testament that Kierkegaard did not believe he could claim authorial responsibility for the philosophical and existential position the work demanded. In this sense, the pseudonym 'Anti-Climacus' was established because Kierkegaard did not think he lived up to the esteemed teachings of *SUD* and another book Anti-Climacus pseudonymously authored, *Practice in Christianity*.

Kierkegaard later came to revoke the use of the pseudonym, however, and accepted authorial responsibility for the views that Anti-Climacus expressed in *SUD*'s counterpart *Practice in Christianity* (TM, 67-68). Bruce Kirmmse argues that the reason Kierkegaard revoked the pseudonym was because Kierkegaard finally felt that '[...] he did not need to have authority to speak as one adult to others; being a 'person of character' was sufficient" (Kirmmse, 1996, 270). If Kirmmse is correct, then might we not assume the same of *SUD*? Nothing in Kirmmse's justification prevents such a reading, apart from the fact that Kierkegaard did not explicitly revoke the pseudonym

of the *SUD*.<sup>28</sup> If the pseudonym is revoked (or at least a candidate to be revoked), then Crites' argument would also be attributable to Kierkegaard himself: Kierkegaard authors a work which is entirely consistent with being read as a social philosophy and yet nevertheless shows an obvious and philosophically unjustified bias for an individualistic reading. Whether the viewpoint of the *SUD* can be called Kierkegaard's or not, Crites at least joins Perkins in criticising the (here pseudonymous) author of one of the works in Kierkegaard's *oeuvre* for not supplying a positive account of sociability (or for ruling one out), though such an account would be entirely consistent with that work.

On similar lines, Merold Westphal does not think that Kierkegaard's position entails fighting for 'worldly change' but nevertheless notes that even sympathetic readers of Kierkegaard wish that Kierkegaard '[...] had given greater thought to the link between responsibility and solidarity, had given us more of a positive politics to go with [his] critique of violent and complacent politics' (Westphal, 2008, 178, n.54). The idea that a positive social or political programme might be at odds with Kierkegaard's theory of the political is not entertained by any of these three thinkers.

Daniel Conway takes somewhat of an intermediary position. Despite acknowledging the fact that Kierkegaard exhibited 'critical acuity [...] of social trends and issues' Conway continues, however, to argue that Kierkegaard's works (especially *Two Ages*) contains only 'various scattered remarks and observations from which one might plausibly reconstruct something resembling a Kierkegaardian social philosophy'

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<sup>28</sup> Kirmmse does not pose the question in his work. But from personal correspondence, Kirmmse has clarified: 'I don't suppose he [Kierkegaard] would have had any great objection to removing pseudonymity from *Sickness*, but doing so was not immediately relevant to his project in 1854-55 and might even have distracted from it.'

(*ibid.*). The assumption is that these 'scattered remarks' are not theoretically sufficient enough to justify a 'social philosophy'. Conway explicitly links Westphal and Perkins, along with other Kierkegaard scholars like James Marsh, John Hoberman, and Alistair Hannay, as 'notable' examples in the trend of reconstructing this social philosophy (*ibid.*, n.3).<sup>29</sup>

Yet Conway ends with the insightful warning that 'one must always approach such a project under the caution that Kierkegaard himself neither executed nor attempted anything like it' (*ibid.*). Once more, Conway does not argue that this 'reconstructed Kierkegaardian social philosophy' would be contradictory to anything else in Kierkegaard's opus but merely that it is a project that Kierkegaard himself avoided. Thus, any such 'Kierkegaardian' project must simply remember to keep separate the 'reconstructed' elements, and the original.<sup>30</sup>

#### 2.2.2 – Lack of a positive political programme – a deficiency.

According to the above theorists, the lack of a positive political programme in Kierkegaard's work does not entail that Kierkegaard's thought has no social or political importance. Each of the above thinkers recognises that Kierkegaard's

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<sup>29</sup> It should be noted that here Conway is only mentioning those who have developed a Kierkegaardian social philosophy from the work 'Two Ages'. If we were to expand the selection to all of Kierkegaard's works, we could expect many more 'reconstructions'.

<sup>30</sup> Conway does not explicitly state why these two elements ought to be kept separated, yet I assume it is for the interest of Kierkegaard reception, rather than because of any logical contradiction with such a project. The failure to keep separated the 'reconstructed' and the 'original' elements of Kierkegaard's thought would only obfuscate Kierkegaard's primary texts by superimposing contemporary notions upon them – modern-day notions that Kierkegaard could not conceivably be expected to have considered or known of.

emphasis on the single individual could be a conceptual tool which is used to keep illegitimate political principles in check; and they each see this as politically valuable. Other scholars are less optimistic, however. Some scholars think that the fact that Kierkegaard himself never developed a positive political programme is a sufficient reason for concluding that Kierkegaard's political thought is seriously deficient in some sense.

An example of this is found in David Bruce Fletcher's excellent but under-cited dissertation *Social and political perspectives in the thought of Søren Kierkegaard*. Fletcher notes that Kierkegaard's social and political thought leaves 'the door open for activity of a political nature by granting that appropriate decisions of policy can be legitimately made by associations of concerned individuals' (Fletcher, 1982, 73). 'His [Kierkegaard's] own role' Fletcher continues directly on 'complements this practical activity by providing social change with a "soul"' (*ibid.*).

Fletcher also frequently praises the political value of Kierkegaard's 'own role'. Fletcher notes that: 'Kierkegaard's position focuses on the underlying ethical positions and views of human nature which ontologically ground various social and political organizations' (*ibid.*, 71); that: 'Kierkegaard was indeed concerned greatly for the social and political welfare of society throughout his career' (*ibid.*); and that: 'Kierkegaard saw his task as pointing out the centrality of the relation of the individual to society and to political authority. His [Kierkegaard's] position has the unique strength of seeing genuine equality and individual responsibility as the metaphysical grounding of any well-ordered sociopolitical entity' (*ibid.*, 73). (And

these are but just a few of the important political implications that Fletcher recognises in Kierkegaard's works.)

Despite accepting all of these numerous political insights, however, Fletcher joins the scholars above in lamenting the fact that Kierkegaard remained silent with regards to issues concerning political changes. Fletcher goes so far as to call Kierkegaard's position '[...] a political perspective that is severely defective in its minimization of the essential ingredient of activism' (*ibid.*, 72), as well as stating that Kierkegaard's '[...] approach to concrete political and social problems [is deficient] in that it is idealistic and impractical' (*ibid.*, 73). Kierkegaard's 'quietistic philosophy of resignation' is ultimately termed an 'impotent' response to 'to concrete realities' (*ibid.*, 71-2).

Fletcher postulates that Kierkegaard's lack of positive political suggestions implies that any attempt to consider Kierkegaard a 'political philosopher' is undermined: 'The indifference with which the spiritually oriented citizen is supposed to regard political authority certainly appears not to be an adequate basis for a truly well-rounded political philosophy' (*ibid.*, 72). Furthermore Fletcher explicitly avoids ever terming Kierkegaard's thought 'political theory', 'political philosophy', or 'theory of the political'. Fletcher argues instead that Kierkegaard gives us 'a great deal of positive content to [...] social and political thought', with his 'social and political perspective', 'insight', or 'outlook'<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> Such remarks are scattered around the concluding pages of the dissertation, the title of which itself follows this trend: 'Social and political *perspectives* in the thought of Søren Kierkegaard' (my emphasis) (See Fletcher, 1982, 70-74).

Indeed, many of the scholars working on Kierkegaard's political thought fail to consider whether Kierkegaard might have a 'theory of the political'. Michele Nicoletti, for example, apparently follows Fletcher's cue in stating that: 'In Kierkegaard's thought it is not really possible to find a true philosophy of politics. Politics itself is considered as something outside his interests [...]' (Nicoletti, 1992, 184).

I believe that many of these authors are partially correct. Later on in this thesis, for example, I shall argue for a position that appears to be similar to Nicoletti's: that 'politics' is 'something outside [Kierkegaard's] interests'. Nevertheless, it remains to be clarified exactly what Nicoletti means by 'politics'. If we define 'politics' extremely narrowly and take it only to mean 'providing a programme for positive political change' then I am in full agreement with Nicoletti. If, however, we take 'politics' to include the relation that political entities have with non-political entities, then I must disagree (as will be seen in more detail in chapter three below).

Perhaps it can be seen from some of the differing remarks from the scholars cited in this section that those working on Kierkegaard's political thought frequently fail to clarify what they mean by such terms as 'philosophy of politics', 'well-rounded political philosophy', 'a coherent, fully articulated social theory', 'positive politics', or 'fight for' 'worldly change'. Such ambiguities contain partial truths but can also unfortunately hinder us in our understanding of precisely how Kierkegaard's thought should be considered as politically valuable or defective. In every case, however, we can note that Kierkegaard's lack of a positive political programme has been judged as a deficiency or otherwise a lamentable loss.

In the next chapter I shall outline Kierkegaard's theory of the political. I will offer an alternative reading to the opinions of the scholars examined in this chapter. Rather than being a 'missing ingredient', as it were, I shall argue that Kierkegaard's failure to suggest positive policies is in fact an integral aspect of his theory of the political. A large degree of the novelty and value of the former rests on the fact that Kierkegaard was philosophically committed to refraining to provide positive political principles.

### 2.3 Concluding Remarks.

The general trend in the contemporary scholarly literature is a recognition that Kierkegaard says things that appear to be political by nature. These comments are thought to be ultimately quite fragmentary in nature, but it is at least recognised that Kierkegaard engaged in some kind of political ontology (however successfully or not). Kierkegaard argued that some parts of life are political and ought to be acknowledged and dealt with as such, and others are not political and so ought to be treated differently. Many authors also note that some of the more political statements that Kierkegaard makes might be interesting, applicable, or pertinent – as Bruce Fletcher's dissertation highlights.

Other contemporary scholars might hold that Kierkegaard's political insights could be held together by a general theory, but that this theory is only accidentally 'political'. For example, it might be thought that Kierkegaard has a religious theory that just so happens to incorporate aspects that are more ostensibly political.

In the previous chapter we had an in-depth discussion of a political-theological reading of John Locke. There we concluded that even if the entirety of John Locke's 'Second Treatise' had been written for primarily theological reasons this alone would not be adequate grounds for judging that the latter contains no theory of the political.



As it happens, however, a similar criticism has recently been levelled against Kierkegaard's thought.

Joakim Garff has recently termed Kierkegaard's political thought 'a-political' because Kierkegaard's theory of the political is grounded in commitments that are altogether outside of the political realm (such as religious beliefs).<sup>32</sup> Since Kierkegaard's theory of the political ultimately relates itself to non-political (existential or theological) commitments, Kierkegaard's political thought, Garff argues, often '[...] does not relate itself to the factual, political circumstances at hand' (Garff, 1999, 144). Garff also notes that Kierkegaard admits to having no time for political questions. Garff cites Kierkegaard's own testimony as evidence of this attitude, when he had said to his contemporary, Janus Lauritz Andreas Kolderup-Rosenvinge [1792-1950]: "No, politics is not for me. To follow politics, even if only domestic politics, is nowadays an impossibility, for me, at any rate" (cited in: *ibid.*, 139. Original from Kierkegaard's *Letters and Documents* [hereafter: simply LD]: Kierkegaard 1978a, 253).

If we relate Garff's criticism to the theological interpretation of Locke examined earlier we might want to ask why we should deem such a position 'a-political' rather than 'political'. I believe that Kierkegaard's theory of the political does ultimately

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<sup>32</sup> Garff's comments are concerned with Kierkegaard's *Two Ages* and his (nine) letters to Janus Lauritz Andreas Kolderup-Rosenvinge, the latter of which were written between 1847 and 1850. Despite this, Garff appears to intend this analysis of Kierkegaard's political view to extend throughout the authorship.

Note also that the term 'a-political' is ominously close to the term 'apolitical'; but we can assume that the two are not to be confused. In a similarly confusing vein, Anselm Kyongsuk Min has termed Kierkegaard's politics a '[...] moralistic, apolitical politics' (Min, 2000, 293, n.10); and Martin J. Beck Matušík has read Kierkegaard in a postmodern way, arguing that Kierkegaard's thought can best be termed 'Nonpolitical politics' (Matušík, 1998, 6-7). Finally, Ingrid Basso has termed at least some of Kierkegaard's political expressions as an "apolitical religious point of view" (Basso, 2009, 104). I suspect that many of these scholars recognise that Kierkegaard's critical judgements of various political trends are both 'politically directed' (i.e., concerned with 'political' questions such as the extent of freedom of speech) and yet religiously motivated. I think that there is something to be said for this idea, and hope to clarify what I take to be the correct intuitions behind these otherwise quite puzzling terms.

relate back to primarily non-political interests. Whether or not it nevertheless defends a theory of the political is a separate issue (and the subject of the next chapter). According to Garff's definition, we would have to argue that readings of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, de Tocqueville, and Schmitt, as theorists engaged in 'political theology', could risk becoming 'a-political' if they did not 'not relate [to] the factual, political circumstances at hand'.

The great majority of canonically recognised political theorists ground their theories in 'non-political' interests – in the perfectibility of the individual person, for example. For most political theorists, political entities are merely additional (even if exceptionally beneficial) means to some other, non-necessarily political good, such as the individual's pursuit of the good life. Where political theorists differ in respect to Kierkegaard is with their willingness to engage in and use politics - and here politics is more narrowly construed as practical policy-making – as a feasible means to implementing their non-political goals. Kierkegaard is not, as he occasionally testifies, interested in political matters narrowly construed (Kierkegaard 1982, 54; Kierkegaard 2009, 60; LD, 253). Yet this does not imply that Kierkegaard does not consider 'the factual, political circumstances at hand' *at all*. Kierkegaard might not foster an interest in the narrower mechanisms of party politics, but he does have an especially perceptive grasp of the social conditions of any given situation. Kierkegaard is not *such* a detached idealist, and his existential and theological commitments *are* important enough for him to recognise that an understanding of any given political circumstance might be a necessary requirement for successfully enacting his principal, non-political interests. Hence, I shall argue in the following chapters that Kierkegaard's principally existentialist concerns are in fact responsive to

'the factual, political circumstances at hand' – and hence that Kierkegaard is no more 'a-political' than any other theorist of political theology.

Garff's understanding of Kierkegaard, I would argue, has many similarities with other contemporary scholars that were examined above. Garff makes some points that are perfectly valid. Kierkegaard's theory of politics is necessarily grounded and informed by non-political commitments. Both Garff and the theorists examined in section '2.2' above also correctly identify that Kierkegaard lacks a positive political programme. Nevertheless, I want to challenge the idea that Kierkegaard's thought can be singled out as 'a-political' (or 'defective') because it is grounded in 'non-political' commitments; because it lacks a positive political programme; or because it could not be responsive to factual circumstances, owing to the fact that Kierkegaard lacks both knowledge of and interest in party politics. Instead, I would argue that Kierkegaard's political thought can only rightly be judged as 'deficient' for these reasons if one already expects it to be a *political theory* rather than a theory of the political.

If what Kierkegaard presents us with *is* taken to be a *political theory* then, given the requirements of what a political theory ought to be [#3.1] I would also have to agree that it is a rather deficient one. Given that a political theory must provide a theoretically robust basis for how political entities ought to be practically arranged, Kierkegaard's 'political thought/contribution' is indeed deeply deficient - *qua* political theory. It seems to me that much of the current literature on Kierkegaard's political thought judges it to be deficient *qua* political theory; but extends the criticism of the latter to apply to Kierkegaard's political thought *in toto*.

In short then, I claim that two misconceptions have clouded much of the literature on Kierkegaard's political contribution. The first is to assume that since Kierkegaard lacks a positive political programme, and that since such a programme would be by definition un-Kierkegaardian, Kierkegaard's political contribution (on the whole) ought to be considered as deficient. The literature often explicitly refrains from calling Kierkegaard a 'political philosopher' and I know of no instances in the literature where it has been noted that Kierkegaard defended a theory of the political.

The second misconception, which is exemplified by Garff but also affects many of the other scholars mentioned in this chapter, is the tendency to judge Kierkegaard's theory of the political as if it were a political theory. Judged in light of the latter, Kierkegaard's theory of the political would quite rightly be deficient. Nevertheless, the critical reception of Kierkegaard's political thought that has, in a large respect, been inadvertently perpetuated by both of these misconceptions cloud the fact that Kierkegaard develops an interesting and novel theory of the political. It would still be an open question as to whether Kierkegaard's theory of the political, judged as such, would be deemed deficient. (For example, I will pursue Adorno's criticism that even *qua* theory of the political Kierkegaard's thought is deficient in chapter seven.) I am inclined to think that it would not. Still, the point is that some aspects of Kierkegaard's political thought have been misconceived and hence improperly judged in recent work. I aim to address this shortfall.

In the next chapter I will outline Kierkegaard's theory of the political. I believe that Kierkegaard's theory of the political was developed from some of his earliest works and ran throughout his entire authorship. Indeed, this is a primary goal of this thesis

and will be argued for in more depth in chapters three through to six (but especially in chapter four). Despite the fact that it informed his authorship, Kierkegaard only explicitly sets his theory of the political down in writing quite some way through his authorship (i.e., between 1846 and 1851). Hence, in attempting to explicitly articulate Kierkegaard's theory of the political I will first examine these writings before going on to show in what ways Kierkegaard's theory of the political has informed some of his earliest and latest works.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### Kierkegaard's Theory of the Political.

#### Introduction.

Despite the fact that I argue that a theory of the political runs throughout Kierkegaard's authorship, Kierkegaard only really explicitly outlines his political position part way through it. Even then, Kierkegaard's theory of the political is only discussed in small sections of some of his works (many of which were not published during his lifetime): in *An Open Letter* [1851], *The Point of View of My Work as an Author* [1859-posthumously - hereafter simply; TPV], and in various journal entries and scattered remarks that examine Luther's reformation.

In each articulation of his theory of the political Kierkegaard maintains certain crucial elements. (These are detailed in a table on p.139 below.) Nevertheless, the differing texts emphasise different aspects of his theory and so provide additional information to, or arguments for, Kierkegaard's theory of the political. Hence it will be useful to look at each of these works in turn.

### 3.1 *An Open Letter*

Kierkegaard's first clear explanation of his political thought was prompted by a misunderstanding by one of his contemporaries. In 1851, Andreas Gottlob Rudelbach [1792-1862] published a book called 'On Civil Marriage' [original: *Om det Borgerlige Ægteskab*]. In the work, Rudelbach appears to suggest that Kierkegaard would endorse establishing civil marriages in Denmark. Rudelbach makes two claims in this tract that Kierkegaard specifically responded to. The first is that the highest interest of the Danish church is '[...] to become emancipated particularly from what is rightly called *habitual* and *State Christianity*' (cited in Kierkegaard, *The Corsair Affair*, [hereafter simply; *COR*], 51. Original emphasis). The second claim that Rudelbach makes is that '[...] for this emancipation civil marriage is an important, perhaps indispensable, instrument, a necessary link in [...] the ushering in of religious freedom' (*ibid.*).

With regards to the first claim (that the Church needs to be emancipated and particularly from the state), Rudelbach writes in a footnote that the same point has been made by '[...] one of our outstanding contemporary writers, Søren Kierkegaard [...]' (*ibid.*). Rudelbach does not explicitly state that Kierkegaard shares the same sentiments with regards to the second claim (that a good way for religious emancipation to occur is via the introduction of civil marriage). Nevertheless, Kierkegaard was still eager to ensure both that no one mistakenly took his thought to

contain recommendations for positive political policies (as with the second claim Rudelbach makes), as well as clarifying specifically how he only partially agreed with the first claim.

Rudelbach's understanding of Kierkegaard's authorial project, the latter states, is only 'fairly' accurate – a 'half-truth'. Yet even this evaluation seems generous; for Kierkegaard goes on to argue that Rudelbach's first claim is only *partly* true, whereas the second claim is *completely* false (*ibid.*). In a footnote, Kierkegaard importantly clarifies that despite the fact that he does talk about 'the Church' in much of his authorship, he only writes about the emancipation of the church because of his *foremost* interest in the emancipation of 'the single individual'. Kierkegaard is not concerned with Church issues *per se*, but only insofar as he is concerned with the existential (and specifically ethico-religious) development of each person (*ibid.*, n.1).

Kierkegaard importantly believes this to have been the obvious, authorial task of his entire authorship<sup>33</sup> (or at least the authorship since *Either/Or* [hereafter simply; E/O I, for volume one; E/O II, for volume II]) – pseudonymous and upbuilding alike. This point provides the textual evidence for a key tenet of this thesis: Kierkegaard's authorship is aimed at helping 'that single individual' become aware of the requirements necessary for one's 'inward deepening'. Many of the obstacles to spiritual deepening are the individual's own failings, but some might be caused by external parties. Kierkegaard believed that some of the external hindrances to the

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<sup>33</sup> For Kierkegaard's own assessment of the true beginning of his authorship, see n.78 below. Note also that this piece contains the first published instance in a self-signed work of Kierkegaard using the term '*Forfatter-Virksomhed*' (authorship), a concept which becomes the central theme of the later work *The Point of View of My Work as an Author*, and which is the second major work to clarify Kierkegaard's political thought. (The term is even employed in the full, original title of TPV: *Synspunktet for min Forfatter-Virksomhed. En ligefrem Meddelelse, Rapport til Historien*).



individual's spiritual progression could be circumvented via his (Kierkegaard's) authorship. In later writings, however, Kierkegaard highlights that his authorial task was unable to circumvent some obstacles to spiritual progressions. In such a situation, obstacles to spiritual progression must be removed. This self-ascribed authorial task, articulated both in *An Open Letter* but also throughout most other works in the authorship, ultimately justifies Kierkegaard's call for the separation of Denmark's State-Church marriage in his final publications; or so I shall go on to argue. A central interpretive stance that I shall defend throughout this thesis, thus, is that the authorial task that Kierkegaard here explains to Rudelbach – that of helping 'that single individual' attain 'inward deepening' – both motivates Kierkegaard's (later) call for political reform, as well as unites this later work with his earlier pieces. In other words, I maintain that helping 'that single individual' attain 'inward deepening' is the prominent goal of Kierkegaard's entire authorship – and even of some of his non-authorial activities.

Sticking with the text in question, however, one would be forgiven for initially thinking that Kierkegaard has no concern for political change and/or civil liberties. Kierkegaard follows up his point (of being interested not primarily with church concerns but only of the single individual) by explicitly stating that he has a deep suspicion of 'politically achieved free institutions' (*ibid*, 54). Later on the same page, Kierkegaard claims that he has never fought for the political emancipation of any specific group or cause (bar that of the single individual). Furthermore, he argues that he has never even sought the emancipation of the single individual in external, political changes (as opposed to 'inward deepening'). We will examine Kierkegaard's notion of 'inward deepening' below when we look at the specifically existential aspect

of his theory of the political.) Thus, Kierkegaard clarifies that despite his support for the emancipation of 'the Church', he has not actively sought this emancipation any more than he has '[...] fought for the emancipation of Greenland commerce, of women,<sup>34</sup> of the Jews, or of anyone else' (*ibid.*). This I take to be evidence of the fact that whilst Kierkegaard had constantly sought the existential emancipation of the individual from the church throughout his authorship, he had never (hitherto) fought for this commitment in a specifically political way - by balloting for policy change, for example. Nor had Kierkegaard ever sought emancipation for specifically political reasons, such as for securing civil liberties or political rights.

One could be forgiven for taking such assertions as evidence that Kierkegaard disdained any attempt at securing civil liberties. One would, after all, be slightly correct. But Kierkegaard's view is a little more complex than simply condemning or condoning this pursuit. Kierkegaard's worry, as his careful response to Rudelbach highlights, is that people would seek to remedy problems that are existential in nature through purely political means. Kierkegaard sees this as an error that could have disastrous consequences.

Proof of this can be seen in two statements that Kierkegaard makes about civil liberties. Both statements, it should be noted, vastly inform Kierkegaard's theory of the political without necessarily receiving a detailed explanation in this text. The first declaration Kierkegaard makes is that he has nothing against civil liberties *per se*.

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<sup>34</sup> An interesting parallel in feminist interpretations of Kierkegaard's thought yields similar findings to our political examination. Whilst feminist interpreters of Kierkegaard might lament the fact that Kierkegaard offers no apparent structural solution to obvious and widespread gender inequality (e.g., Walsh, 2000, 17), some still find his emphasis on the essential equality of all with regards to existential development to be a useful tool for the feminist cause (e.g., Berry, 1997a, 51-53; 1997b, 25-48; Bertung, 1997, 51-67; Walsh, 2000, 17; Watkin, 1997, 69-72).

Kierkegaard quite simply states that: 'If at a given time the forms under which one has to live are not the most perfect, if they can be improved, [then] in God's name do so' (*ibid*, 53). The second key tenet of Kierkegaard's political philosophy is that the specifically political side of the quest for human emancipation is best '[...] entrusted to those who are regularly appointed and trained for such things' (*ibid*, 54. At the bottom of the same page Kierkegaard implies that those appointed for such things are the 'politicians'. See also: *The Moment* [hereafter simply; TM], 60; LD, 253). So Kierkegaard does not have an issue with improving our lot on earth via political alterations *per se*, but simply does not see his own authorship as contributing anything to this undertaking. Throughout his authorship, Kierkegaard generally allows politicians to suggest and supply the policy changes that improve temporal welfare.<sup>35</sup>

The picture painted thus far is, however, a little incomplete. It is certainly true that Kierkegaard is often very suspicious and even critical of political change that seeks religious emancipation. In *An Open Letter* Kierkegaard most informingly states why he maintains this ambivalent attitude. For one thing, he appears to believe that politics and the existential are very separate entities. In fact, Kierkegaard first publicly states his political ontology, and his theory of the political, in *An Open Letter*. Kierkegaard argues that politics properly only concerns itself with the 'external' (*ibid*.). Politics alters the external or worldly 'forms' or institutions that a 'single individual' will find him or herself living in. Christianity (more specifically, but existential development of any kind more generally) is, on the contrary, 'inwardness, inward deepening' (*ibid*, 53), or 'inward development' (my term).

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<sup>35</sup> Kierkegaard might be being a little ungenerous in this text, for as his journals reveal, he explicitly states that he also "[...] fight[s] for human rights" (JP IV: 4131). Kierkegaard, however, wishes to emphasise is that not all (if any) existential problems can be solved by campaigning for rights; a point he believes his contemporaries have often dangerously missed.

For Kierkegaard, the existential necessarily requires subjective and qualitative change. The political, on the other hand, works by altering externalities. But alterations to externalities cannot in and of themselves positively contribute to a single individual's existential development. This is because any external change would still require 'the single individual' to inwardly relate to those changes in an authentic way in order to fully accommodate the latter. Since existential development requires the individual to subjectively or inwardly appropriate, authentically relate to, and/or take responsibility to his or her external conditions, existential development must include some degree of attention to the given external conditions. Hence, Kierkegaard's authorship is an attempt at guiding the 'single individual' towards existential (inward) development; but for precisely this reason, Kierkegaard's theory must also be responsive and reflexive to external change. A central argument of this thesis is that Kierkegaard's thought evidences his on-going reflexive understanding of external, social, political, and ideological, trends and changes (- argued throughout chapters four through to seven). As his comments to Andreas Rudelbach suggest, Kierkegaard is personally engaged with dispelling the illusion that one can achieve existential development through alterations to external forms (which include political reform) alone. Kierkegaard's preferred method of inspiring existential development is in using his authorship to guide the individual towards spiritual deepening *despite* the fact that the political environment the single individual finds themselves in might not be perfect.

Kierkegaard says as much about Christianity as a particular existential ideal in *An Open Letter*. He makes the very bold, and not immediately justified claim that since Christianity is essentially inwardness, and that since politics is fundamentally

concerned with externalities, Christianity can exist '[...] in any climate [...] even] in the most imperfect [external] conditions and forms' (*ibid*, 54). Furthermore, Kierkegaard claims that political action in favour of bolstering the single individual's appropriation of the Christian faith may even result in the downfall of the latter:

Christianity will not be helped from the outside by external institutions and constitutions, and least of all [...] in a social and amicable way, by elections or by a lottery of numbers.<sup>36</sup> On the contrary, to be aided in this way is the downfall of Christianity. (*ibid*, 55.)

Whilst it might be conceptually plausible for Christianity, or existential authenticity more generally to exist in *any* kind of political system, this is not the case empirically. Later on in his authorship, Kierkegaard argues that the existential development of a typical individual can be seriously thwarted. In fact, external alterations can render some ways of life completely ineffectual. (I shall assess this claim in more depth below, in chapters five and six.) Even here, in his first explicit articulation of his theory of the political, Kierkegaard is quick to emphasise that just because Christianity is essentially inwardness this does not imply that '[...] Christianity consists purely and simply of putting up with everything in regard to external forms, without doing anything at all [...] if worse comes to worst. But my entire activity as an author', Kierkegaard continues directly on, 'has had nothing to do with such an eventuality' (*ibid*, 56). We could ominously add to the end of this quote: *yet* – for Kierkegaard does arguably encounter a situation where his 'existential-corrective to the established order' (*ibid*.) is no longer a sufficient answer to the existential disasters that the latter is causing. In chapter six below we shall see that when his

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<sup>36</sup> By which I assume Kierkegaard means voting.

authorship fails to provide the required 'existential-corrective' to the Danish state-church marriage, Kierkegaard directs his authorial task towards working with the state at eradicating political obstacles to existential development (i.e., to proposing and fighting for negative policy alterations).

Seemingly prophesising the situation that he would later encounter, Kierkegaard had already written in *An Open Letter* that: 'There are situations, therefore, in which an established order can be of such a nature that the Christian ought not to put up with it, ought not to say that Christianity means precisely this indifference to the external' (*ibid.*). Just because Christianity, conceptually speaking, is indifference to external change it still might (and perhaps should) nevertheless be highly reflexive towards the external in actual practice. Even when the established order can no longer be accepted, however, Kierkegaard does not obviously suggest political change as the remedy. In fact he appears to advocate the opposite. In such situations Kierkegaard suggests that one simply let '[...] the established order stand – not a word, not a syllable, not a letter directed toward an external change [...]'. One can only consult one's consciousness and do what one sincerely believes to be authentically religious. As if responding to Rudelbach's own suggestion for civil marriage becoming institutionalised, Kierkegaard mentions (in a footnote) that Luther's own marriage as a priest (despite papal decree) and to a nun (despite public opinion) was an affront to the established order but in a completely different way to the political methodology of taking petitions to parliament (*ibid*, 58, n.1.). Rather than fighting for worldly change, Luther's activism (in this example at least) involved staying stead-fast to his own quest for authenticity irrespective of the threats of martyrdom from the established order.

Why does Kierkegaard apparently prefer martyrdom to political reform? In *An Open Letter* Kierkegaard makes surprisingly insightful claims with regards to political attempts at solving religious problems. Kierkegaard disdains political reform because he argues that it is typically both futile and harmful. Political reform is futile, Kierkegaard argues, because a change in the external forms of things (a change in the official state church, for example) has no effect *in and of itself* on religious inwardness. Hence, if political change attempts to solve a problem that is actually the manifestation of a lack of religious inwardness the political change, *qua political change*, will have no effect. An historical example of a failed political solution to a religious problem could be Luther's involvement with the reformation. (This will soon be examined in more depth in section 3.3 below.)

If Kierkegaard believed some political reforms to be *futile*, what is more worrying is that he argues that they are often *harmful* too. This is because a religious (or otherwise existential) problem is mistakenly assumed to have been *remedied* by the external, political change. This gives the illusory impression that existential impoverishment has been diagnosed and cured when in fact it remains. Kierkegaard calls this second issue the result of a 'disastrous confusion of politics and Christianity' - and it is this 'disastrous confusion' that he is at pains to clarify and avoid (*ibid.*, 53).

Kierkegaard seems to think that political change is a natural response to widespread existential impoverishment, and it certainly can be carried out in good faith. Nevertheless, this concern, in and of itself, will be unending. The political reformer will constantly be seeking to employ external reformations to solve a problem that is

best solved in a completely different way. Hence politics, with regards to solving existential problems at least, will necessarily become engaged in a 'Tantalus like busyness about external change' (*ibid*, 54); a tempting but futile and never-ending quest to solve religious problems with political means. Such an engagement only catalyses the 'disastrous confusion of politics and Christianity' through perpetuating the illusion that a political alteration had solved an essentially existential problem, and hence compounds the very problems that it sought to solve. Kierkegaard's views on external reform as a solution to existential problems therefore highlight why he is so eager to distance himself from Rudelbach's own suggestion of emancipating the church by introducing the institution of civil marriage. For Kierkegaard, the existential emancipation of the individual can be secured without necessarily resorted to political emancipation such as, in this case, the right to civil marriage. Diverting attention from the existential emancipation of the single individual towards political reform might potentially only lead us astray from the root problem.

As we saw above, Kierkegaard does not oppose the pursuit of securing civil liberties when they do not risk causing more existential harm than good (*ibid*, 53). Kierkegaard does, however, object to the unduly optimistic belief (which he perceived to be widespread in his day) that *all* problems could be solved politically.<sup>37</sup> As Kierkegaard highlights, *some* problems, including existential ones, can often only be compounded by a resorting to political change. With regards to existential issues then, Kierkegaard prefers to employ his authorial method of helping people become authentic individuals despite the fact that the times they live in might not be optimal at accommodating for such a task. Whilst it does not come through in the text,

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<sup>37</sup> This phenomenon will be examined in more depth below (in sections 3.3, and 4.1.1. See also n.82)



Kierkegaard seems to reserve resorting to 'external', political change for the extreme circumstance where 'the single individual' is so existentially impoverished that the authorship itself becomes ineffectual at providing existential edification.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, it should now hopefully be clear from *An Open Letter* that Kierkegaard's reluctance to provide positive political change is a result of his specific theory of the political. According to the latter, the existential realm and the political realm are categorically different entities. Rather than attempting to remedy religious problems with political means, one gets the impression that existential interests would be best aided if the political realm stuck more stringently to answering 'genuinely' political questions about 'external' affairs – such as whether the building of a new road would be in the public interest or not (see: *For Self-Examination* [hereafter simply; FSE], 19).

Kierkegaard predominately directing his authorship towards aiding the existential development of the single individual, but feared that his works might mistakenly be interpreted as defending a political programme. This false reading would both detract attention from Kierkegaard's true authorial interests as well as risk having the reader accidentally confuse the logically distinct categories of the existential and the political. Kierkegaard's refusal to be allied with a project of endorsing 'free institutions' as a way of securing civic liberties or political rights, promoting policy changes or bill amendments, or providing guidelines for external, political change in general, could therefore be seen as a purposeful attempt at resisting to add to the 'disastrous confusion' of the genuinely political with the properly non-political.

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<sup>38</sup> This will be a key argument of chapter six below.

This political philosophy, far from being quietist, is Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political in action. Kierkegaard's authorship is a remedy to the harmful religious, political, and existential consequences that the single individual might be subjected to by various external factors (and these can include political decisions that have failed to respect Kierkegaard's theory of the political). Kierkegaard's theory of the political is a nuanced but well thought out argument that takes seriously into consideration the fact that positive political reform can sometimes be (existentially) counter-productive. As a result, Kierkegaard's reluctance to provide guidelines for external change can be seen as a direct consequence of an interest in minimising political turmoil and the resulting suffering each 'single individual' might incur from the former.

### 3.2 *The Point of View for My Work as an Author.*

#### Introduction

The second primary source of an explicit articulation of Kierkegaard's theory of the political is found in the posthumous work *The Point of View of my Work as an Author*. The Princeton University Press edition of *The Point of View* is a collection of various pieces. All but one of the pieces were originally published posthumously in 1859 by Søren's brother, Peter Kierkegaard. The Princeton edition of these pieces is split into two parts. Part one is called 'The Equivocalness or Duplexity in the Whole Authorship, Whether the Author Is an Esthetic or a Religious Author'; and part two is named 'The Authorship Viewed as a Whole, and from the Point of View that the Author is a Religious Author'. Our focus is primarily on a collection of material supplementing 'part two' which itself is given the sub-heading '"The Single Individual" Two "Notes" Concerning My Work as an Author'<sup>39</sup>, as well as the final (stand-alone) piece in the Princeton collection 'Armed Neutrality'. In both of these latter sections, Kierkegaard further outlines his theory of the political.

Despite the fact that the material was published in 1859, it was written much earlier (between 1846 [TPV, 112, n.1] and 1848) and thus predates the work previously

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<sup>39</sup> This collection contains the following pieces: 'Preface'; 'No. 1 For the Dedication to "That Single Individual"'; 'No.2 A Word on the Relation of My Work as an Author to "The Single Individual"'; 'Postscript'; 'Postscript to the "Two Notes"'; and 'Armed Neutrality'. None of the parts of the texts we will examine (i.e., those that contain Kierkegaard's theory of the political) were published during Kierkegaard's lifetime.

examined: *An Open Letter*. This may explain why Kierkegaard's position is close in both works. Nevertheless, an investigation into the theory of the political contained within *The Point of View* has its own reasons for being highly fruitful. This is because Kierkegaard purposely held off publishing the material because he thought it might be misunderstood by his contemporaries. Kierkegaard had pedagogical reasons for carefully considering what (and how) he published. Perhaps Kierkegaard worried about his contemporaries reading his authorship in an over-politicised manner. Such a misinterpretation might be akin to the misreading that Kierkegaard believed Andreas Rudelbach to have made three years later. Whatever the reasons for holding back the publication of this material, in it Kierkegaard elaborates upon his theory of the political in more depth than in his response to Rudelbach and brings other important topics into discussion.

### 3.2 *The Point of View*.

In *The Point of View* Kierkegaard maintains his position that there is a categorical difference between the worldly – which is partly legislated by the political realm – and the spiritual, which is qualitatively different from the former (TPV, 103, 121, 130). Interestingly for our purposes, Kierkegaard gives additional reasons for thinking that the spiritual and political are irrevocably different in *The Point of View* than he had in *An Open Letter*. When it comes to spiritual development – and whilst this might include any form of existential development, it is especially clear with regards to religious development for Kierkegaard – each person must essentially consult their

own conscience. A person does not achieve spiritual or existential development by comparing themselves with others. Whilst such a comparison with another may well inspire one to undertake spiritual development, one still must eventually consult one's own conscience if the latter is to be achieved. This gives Kierkegaard another reason for believing that existential questions cannot be answered politically, e.g., by majority vote. With respect to existential questions, in contrast to political ones, Kierkegaard says that one '[...] should be careful about becoming involved with "the others", [and] essentially should speak only with God and with himself – since only one reaches the goal' (TPV, 106; see also p. 123). (For non-Christian existential development, 'one's conscience', or 'one's deities' might replace 'God' in this quote.) In his religious, signed works, in fact, Kierkegaard states that the ability to consult God and one's consciousness and to develop existentially *is* just what makes us a human being – a spiritual being with a 'kinship with the divine' (*ibid.*, cf., *Upbuilding Discourses In Various Spirits* [hereafter simply; UDVS], 193).

Spiritual development is thus not a case of being in a 'developed' position relative to others. One would not progress spiritually even if all other beings were to simultaneously become spiritually destitute. Perhaps this is why Kierkegaard defines the 'the single individual' as '*the* category of spirit, of spiritual awakening [...]' (TPV, 121, my emphasis). Yet being a single individual does not entail individualism (as I shall argue in more depth below: 7.3.1; 7.4). One still relates to other people in a genuine way, respecting both their differences as well as their fundamentally universal human dignity. Here, being a single individual simply means that one does not judge one's existential progression relatively to others, or ignore it by being swept along by 'the crowd'. Nor does one let majority views wholly dictate the course of

one's spiritual development. Being a 'single individual' is thus a sort of task and a responsibility which also has some ethical connotations because it is something each person owes to themselves and to others (*ibid.*, 123.). It can be daunting to consult one's conscience about the course of one's life, especially if one thinks that it might fall short of a standard that one would wish to attain, and yet it is one's responsibility to do so anyway. Furthermore, being a responsible 'single individual' does not in any way alleviate one's ethical and existential duties to one's fellows. On the contrary, the former may inform and even heighten the latter responsibilities.

From what Kierkegaard says about the category of the spiritual, it should be clear why he believes that it is in some ways '[...] as diametrically opposite to politics as possible' (*ibid.*, 121.). For one thing, each single individual's spiritual development is a personal and somewhat isolated task. Hence, the task developing existentially could not be solved on a large scale by a third-person entity using external reform. Similarly, one could not appeal to a majority vote to answer questions of how existential development ought to be undertaken by the community; even if a community happened to be entirely composed of 'single individuals'. Furthermore, acquiring 'worldly gain' – such as 'power, honor' (*ibid.*), and we might add civil rights and liberties, will not necessarily promote existential development either. None of these political measures in and of themselves will necessitate the single individual to consult his or her conscience and wilfully and responsibly choose to undertake existential development. Hence, Kierkegaard argues that political entities, by definition, cannot solve existential problems; and, for reasons which we shall shortly examine (as well as for some that were examined above), they should not attempt to answer spiritual and existential matters either.

As with *An Open Letter*, Kierkegaard does not just think that the confusion of the political with the spiritual is simply a logical confusion, or a category error. Whilst he does believe this to be the case, what is more troubling for him is that he once again argues that this confusion is 'disastrous' in its consequences. In fact, Kierkegaard gives his possibly strongest criticism of the 'disastrous confusion' of the two logically distinct categories in this work. Kierkegaard argues that majority opinion (or vote) can have decisive authority when answering some genuinely political questions (see also: JP IV: 4168, 4199, 4201, 4208).<sup>40</sup> That is to say, some issues are rightfully solved by putting the matter to majority vote. In such instances, the numerical weight of the majority opinion alone might legitimise the latter. This often happens in 'genuinely' political matters. With regards to political questions such as 'Ought we to raise the taxes of the citizenry in order to build more roads; and if so, by how much?', there is no 'right' answer (it might be argued) above and beyond what the given majority of the voting citizenry decree. The 'correctness' of such a proposition is simply one and the same as the outcome of the voting procedure.

With spiritual matters, as we have shown, this is not the case. As we saw above, spiritual matters are decided on an individual basis and only by the single individual who is involved. Kierkegaard goes on to argue that if the solutions of spiritual

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<sup>40</sup> This is not to say that Kierkegaard simply wants to minimise the scope of the political realm. In fact, since Kierkegaard argues that the state has legitimate rule over *all* things secular, he argues that it therefore has governance over areas such as 'art, scholarship, and science' (JP IV, 4168). Hence, Kierkegaard is willing to let the state regulate things that a contemporary liberal would probably take issue with. Furthermore, whilst 'majority vote' can have legitimacy in some political matters, in a more abstract sense the 'numerical' is given legitimacy in areas that extend beyond purely political matters. Hence, Kierkegaard argues that the numerical 'is entirely trustworthy, yes, the only possible trustworthiness, and [a] genuine trustworthiness' with regards to '*everything* finite and temporal'; and 'all kinds of secular activity and commerce in this world' (JP III, 2892, my emphasis). Far from having an *unreservedly* negative opinion of practices such as balloting and voting, therefore, I wish to emphasise that Kierkegaard only refuses the use of these means when they are used to answer genuinely *existential* questions.

questions are sought by appealing to the numerical weight of majority opinion, we risk losing 'humankind's kinship with the divine' (TPV, 107, original emphasis). Such a situation would also risk religious tyranny if the majority predominately believed in only one religion. If religion becomes a political matter, then people might take this dominant religion to be the only true religion (since the correctness of a proposition is decided by majority vote on many political matters), and this would risk it being enforced upon all individuals and regulated by the state. Each person would ironically lose the prerequisite requirements for being genuinely religious. In fact, without the capacity for independently relating to spiritual, ethico-religious matters, the human would cease to be the responsible, developmental human being that they are otherwise suited to be, and risk instead becoming '[...] a specimen to a race endowed with understanding' (*ibid.*, 107.). In other words, the confusion of the political and the existential risks making individual, existential development impossible. The category of the 'single individual' is at risk of being abolished and replaced with an assimilationist view of the person. The only 'development' possible in such a situation would be the development of the entire race that one partakes in. *Genuine* (non-assimilationist) ethical or religious activity would become altogether ineffectual. Kierkegaard worried that the very things which enable one to become a responsible human being are put at jeopardy, which is to say that existential development would be completely ignored.

As we shall see in more depth below, Kierkegaard believed that the majority of the people in his age suffered from a form of spiritual and existential crisis, and that this was largely a result of various social, ideological, but also political trends (chapters five and six). Briefly put, the principal cause of these problems was a confusion of the



legitimate roles of the spiritual and the political. This ideological confusion was manifested in Denmark's state-church marriage, and the ensuing ideological viewpoint that it fostered – that existential and religious matters could be solved by political means and institutions – was what Kierkegaard termed 'Christendom'. One of Kierkegaard's principal objections to developing positive political proposals for solving this spiritual sickness was that the latter could not possibly provide a cure for the former; only the illusion of a cure. The problem here is therefore twofold: not only does the initial spiritual sickness inevitably remain, but the supposed cure also produces illusory beliefs of betterment in its 'patients'.

In his letter to Rudelbach, Kierkegaard presented arguments for believing that the over-zealous busyness of various political endeavours might inadvertently put the spiritual and existential capabilities of the typical individual of that period at risk. Kierkegaard had noted that political activists were taking it upon themselves to attempt to solve spiritual matters with political means. The categorical difference between the two meant, however, that any spiritual problem could not possibly be remedied by political means. Kierkegaard had emphasised that such political zeal towards external reforms only brought about an additional ailment; namely, the pernicious illusion that one's existential development could be taken care of by another person. Whilst political reforms might be able to temporarily cover up the external symptoms of an existential sickness, the spiritual sickness would necessarily still remain. In the long-run, the spiritual sickness that individuals experience will only manifest itself in some other form unless they are honestly faced up to by the single individual. An on-going refusal to properly address existential concerns mixed with the erroneous belief that political entities could solve the problem would

ultimately only prolong or even deepen any existential impoverishment that a person or society at large was experiencing. In other words, as long as political reform is adopted as the methodology for curing existential impoverishment the latter will be perpetuated. This is the vicious cycle that Kierkegaard had called a 'Tantalus like busyness about external change' (COR, 54) and that he sought to avoid compounding.

In the final section of *The Point of View*, Kierkegaard importantly goes into more detail about his own, largely authorial solution to the political turmoil he witnessed around him. In 'Armed Neutrality: or My Position as a Christian Author in Christendom', which was originally intended to be an appendix to 'The Point of View for My Work as an Author' (TPV, 296), Kierkegaard writes that: 'From the very beginning my work has not been [...] an impetuous amendment to the total confusion or a new patch on an old garment' (*ibid.*, 131). By this, Kierkegaard re-emphasises the fact that his authorship is purposefully intended to *not* add to the disastrous mixing of the existential and the political by advocating external reforms.

In contrast to over-optimistically advocating political reform, Kierkegaard argues that what his times need is rather for someone to re-emphasise the existential, the religious, and the spiritual aspect of life by creating a faithful representation of the spiritual ideal – New Testament Christianity. In this way, every single individual 'if he [or she] has a mind to, in quiet solitariness can compare his [or her] own life with the ideal' (*ibid.*). This alternative vision of reform is rather radically at odds with politically-minded reform, and indeed '[...] has no proposal to make and does not lean toward any decision in the external, in the secular world' (*ibid.*, 133). Furthermore, no aspect of the project involves an activist struggle for purely political goals (*ibid.*, 134).

Kierkegaard informatively admits that this idea of reformation has always been his own (*ibid.*, 133), and represents the position he has taken up throughout his authorship (*ibid.*, 129. See also; 115.). Hence, Kierkegaard (once more) claims that his own authorship is an attempt at aiding existential – or minimally, at least, religious – edification and improvement in the individual whilst yet simultaneously avoiding politically-minded reform. Kierkegaard's authorship, I would once more contest, is an on-going attempt at helping to cure the maladies of the 'disastrous' mixing of the political and the spiritual realms whilst also refraining from accidentally adding to the confusion by proposing specifically political reform. If this reading is correct, then it implies that Kierkegaard had been practising his theory of the political throughout the entirety of what he considered to be his proper authorship, i.e., since the publication of *Either/Or*. Kierkegaard's self-ascribed solution to the political turmoil of his times was to advocate a kind of *spiritual* reform or existential corrective rather than political movement; and he admits to having pursued this task (in varying and complicated ways) throughout his entire authorship (*ibid.*, 133-34; see also, 115).<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Kierkegaard's self-confessed plan of the preceding authorship has been scrutinised by some contemporary scholars. Of those that doubt the sincerity of Kierkegaard's own point of view of the authorship (as he elaborates it in *The Point of View*, at least), two different strands of argument have been made. Some scholars believe that Kierkegaard's own justifications of the authorship are insincere, and are an attempt at deliberately deceiving the reader for some other ulterior motive (see for example: Fenger (1980, xiii); Mackey (1986, 163-66); and Poole (1993)). Other scholars are more post-structuralist in arguing that Kierkegaard only ever presents his readers with multiple and often contradictory perspectives on life; his own point of view of the authorship included (see for example: Garff (1998, 2003, 552); and Westfall (2007)). For scholars who tend to agree with Kierkegaard's retrospective judgement of the authorship, see for example: Kirkconnell, 2010; Plekon, 1992, 3; and Watkin, 2000b, 3, *passim*. I side with those who argue that works signed in Kierkegaard's name represent his real views, for the most part at least, and from within the specific contexts in which they were written. (I briefly discuss my interpretation of Kierkegaard's authorship in section '7.1.1.2' below.)

### 3.2.1 Politics as 'sensate' authority.

Just as with *An Open Letter*, however, Kierkegaard is not entirely critical of all political activity. On the contrary, Kierkegaard thinks that the political realm has an important role to play with regards to catering for our temporal (as opposed to our spiritual) welfare. There has been a small amount of attention in Kierkegaard scholarship to the question of the extent to which Kierkegaard values genuine political activity.

Pia Søltoft, for example, has convincingly argued that Kierkegaard places a great degree of value in the political realm. Søltoft argues that since, for Kierkegaard, the political realm legitimately regulates the 'worldly' aspect of life, it is therefore responsible for regulating between the external, worldly, (economic or otherwise) differences between individuals. Søltoft explains that in Kierkegaard's thought 'The political seeks precisely to regulate these [worldly] differences and bring them within a framework that makes it possible for people to live together despite their differences' (Søltoft, 1999, 117).

According to Søltoft's reading, politics certainly has a significant role in the existential life of the individual, especially with regards to fostering sociability and inter-personal relationships (as her previous quote illuminates). When it comes to developing genuine sociability, Søltoft concludes that both '[...] the political and the

religious' are equally necessary (*ibid.*).<sup>42</sup> If Søltoft recognises that both the political and the religious are necessary for genuine sociability, then she also correctly identifies that a failure to recognise the legitimate roles and limitations of the political and the non-political might result in the inadvertent hindrance of genuine sociability. While I agree with her on many points, I do think, however, that Søltoft slightly overemphasises the role that genuine politics has in an individual's pursuit of genuine sociability (i.e., Søltoft's view that the former is a *necessary* constituent of the latter). I shall assess a special case below where Kierkegaard does indeed imply that a political change is a necessary requirement for the establishment and development of genuine sociability (chapters six and seven). For the majority of the time, however, Kierkegaard argues that inward development alone is often all that is required for genuine selfhood and sociability. To say the same in a different way, the political realm can often be organised illegitimately (i.e., in a way that does not respect Kierkegaard's theory of the political), and single individuals can still be genuinely sociable. There is nothing in Kierkegaard's thought which would appear to contradict this position.<sup>43</sup>

Robert Perkins has also noted the social aspect of politics in Kierkegaard's theory of the political but has recognised that politics is not necessary for the former. Hence, Perkins says that Kierkegaard is 'fundamentally concerned with how we organize ourselves into communities and societies in a sense that includes but is not limited to

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<sup>42</sup> The original reads: '[...] between the political and the religious, neither sphere can be eliminated'.

<sup>43</sup> On the contrary, in *Two Ages*, for example, Kierkegaard explicitly states that a political or worldly idea of sociality, an idea of sociality that has 'validity with respect to material interest', is not really sociality at all. Kierkegaard continues on, arguing that the single individual can indeed attain genuine sociability without the need for political intervention: 'It is very doubtful, then, that the age will be saved by the idea of sociality, of association. [...] In our age the principle of association (which at best can have validity with respect to material interest) is not affirmative but negative; it is an evasion, a dissipation, an illusion [...] Not until the single individual has established an ethical stance *despite* the whole world, not until then can there be any question of genuinely uniting [...] (*Two Ages*, 106, my emphasis).

narrower concepts of everyday politics' (1995, 167). Here politics is attributed the more modest role of ordering worldly affairs. I would argue that this task can aid but never necessitate genuine sociability (- not even if the political realm was to legitimately act in conjunction with the religious).

A final class of Kierkegaard scholars have outlined the benefits of (proper) politics entirely in terms of worldly benefits. Bruce Kirmmse, for example, defines Kierkegaard's view of politics as the 'manipulation of objects in the material world for the sake of convenience and comfort' (1990, 474. See also: Kirmmse, 1992, 170). In a similar manner, Michele Nicoletti has defined politics rather neutrally as that which 'plans, regulates, and governs human life in and for temporality' (1992, 184-85). Such scholars outline the benefits politics can bring to aiding the ordering of worldly affairs without necessarily being committed to any additional existential benefits this may bring.

From the examination of Kierkegaard's theory of the political, I do not think that it is an over-statement at all to say that Kierkegaard believes that the political realm can play an extremely important role in human affairs. If the single individual is capable of spiritual development, then he or she is also capable of temporal improvement; and catering for the temporal aspect of the single individual is both an important task as well as one that could not and ought not to be ignored. (This anthropological understanding of the importance of the temporal aspect of the person will be argued for in more depth shortly in section 3.3.1.) In *The Point of View*, as in *An Open Letter*, we once more find that Kierkegaard maintains his typically distanced but still noticeable praise for the worldly benefits that political reform can bring. In *The Point*

*of View*, however, Kierkegaard goes on to confirm that properly political means are entirely appropriate ways of achieving genuinely political goals. Hence, Kierkegaard writes that it is:

[...] perhaps most appropriate to mention once and for all something that is self-evident and something I certainly have never denied — namely, that with regard to all temporal, earthly, worldly goals, the crowd [read: majority vote<sup>44</sup>] can have its validity, even its validity as the decisive factor, that is, as the authority. But I am not speaking about such matters, no more than I occupy myself with such things, I am speaking about the ethical, the ethical-religious [...] and I say that from the ethical-religious point of view the crowd [majority vote] is untruth if it is supposed to be valid as the authority for what truth is (*ibid.*, 106).<sup>45</sup>

In fact, Kierkegaard shares a similar sentiment a little later on in the text: ‘To repeat again, whatever may at times have complete, at times partial, legitimacy in politics and similar areas becomes untruth when it is carried over into the realms of the intellectual, the spiritual, and the religious’ (*ibid.*, 109). Kierkegaard’s second re-emphasis of the legitimacy of political means for securing political ends also highlights two more interesting points. The first is that Kierkegaard separates the ‘religious’ from the ‘spiritual’ (and indeed, ‘intellectual’) realm in a way that informs my reading of ‘the spiritual’ to be more than merely synonymous with ‘religious’. At times, Kierkegaard’s concept of authentic, existential development may be very closely tied in with his personal belief that the demands of the Christian religion (and

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<sup>44</sup> The concepts of ‘the crowd’, in this part of Kierkegaard’s authorship, does extend beyond my rather simple rendition of ‘majority vote’. It includes ‘popular opinion’, for example, which is not necessarily synonymous with ‘majority opinion’. For the present discussion, however, it is sufficient for us to focus on one subset of Kierkegaard’s rather general concept, ‘the crowd’ to highlight its specifically political use. Other fruitful distinctions that this concept contains will be more thoroughly examined in subsequent chapters (e.g., sections ‘5.2.1’, and ‘7.4’).

<sup>45</sup> See also the following journal entries: “All finite matters are suitable for voting” (JP IV: 4199); “[... and] if the matter is of such a nature that it is suitable for settlement by voting, then I am willing to vote [...]” (JP IV, 4201).

a particular interpretation of it at that) best accommodate this existential striving (JP I, 46; JP IV, 4333, Walsh, 1994, 226; cf., JP III, 3102, 3681). Nevertheless, this quote highlights how the two are still importantly separate concepts; a point that weaves its way through much of Kierkegaard's authorship.<sup>46</sup>

An additional point the quote makes is with the juxtaposition of 'intellectual' with 'spiritual' issues. Kierkegaard thinks it would be absurd to say that political means could decide whether *any* propositions whatsoever were true or false. The proposition 'the world is flat' is not made either more or less true or false by majority opinion. Political means can do nothing to affect the integral truth or falsity of *some* propositions. The fact that Kierkegaard allies intellectual issues with spiritual ones serves to highlight the extent to which he thinks that it is absurd (and a category error) to attempt to solve spiritual questions with political means.

With regards to 'sensate authority' (Hyde, 2010, 99, *passim*), Kierkegaard does not say anything critical with regards to majority voting. We had seen above that Kierkegaard had no qualms with the pursuit of civil liberties *per se* (both in sections 3.1 and 3.2). Kierkegaard similarly has nothing critical to say about political endeavours *per se* in *The Point of View*. On the contrary, Kierkegaard explicitly states that political means can have 'validity', 'authority' and 'complete legitimacy' when pursuing goals that respect the proper scope of the political realm, i.e., the catering of the temporal welfare of the single individual or the citizenry. Kierkegaard's principal worry, to repeat, is that the political and the spiritual realm become 'disastrously confused' – in other words, that Kierkegaard's theory of the political not be respected.

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<sup>46</sup> I will briefly outline the way that the concepts of the 'spiritual', 'existential', and 'religious' interact, and how they are similar and different to each other below (section 3.3.1).



In the two works examined above we have outlined Kierkegaard's theoretical view of the nature of the political and its relation to other aspects of life. In the following sub-section, we will examine Kierkegaard's assessment of Martin Luther's reformation. Kierkegaard reads Luther's reformation as originally being intended towards solving a religious matter of an existential kind (i.e., not just 'church policy' but individual's relation to the religious as a way of life). Luther's reformation therefore served for Kierkegaard, I shall argue, as a historical case-study in spiritually-motivated political reform. Kierkegaard later became directly involved in a political matter of his own which stemmed from a religious commitment. It is therefore perhaps only natural that he studied the benefits and deficiencies of Luther's world-renowned reformation. Ultimately, Kierkegaard judged Luther's reformation to have failed its original intentions. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard's study of Luther's reform vastly informs, and brings additional nuances to his own theory of the political. Kierkegaard's reasons for believing that Luther's reformation was not ideal, as well as his descriptions of the deficiencies that it ultimately brought about are well worth examining, especially since they highlight additional aspects of his own theory of the political. Kierkegaard's examination of Luther's reformation will therefore be the central focus of the next sub-section.

### 3.3 Luther: Reform and Counter-reform

#### Introduction

Kierkegaard's journals and papers reveal that from the period of 1849 to 1850 (and once again near the end of the authorship – from 1854-55), Kierkegaard read and annotated much of Luther's writings. I shall argue that the content of Kierkegaard's notes, which primarily revolve around how Luther's spiritual revolution was politically implemented, show that Luther's reform served as a case study for Kierkegaard's own theory of the difference between spiritual and political reform.

Kierkegaard's view of Luther is certainly ambivalent. Kierkegaard understands that Luther was reforming against a specific manifestation of 'secular-mindedness' [*verdslighed*] (JP III: 2504, 2528, 2898; FSE, 17; JFY, 193). For Kierkegaard, secular-mindedness is one specific way of reacting to, and ultimately denying, the spiritual task of becoming a self. Secular-minded people seek to immerse themselves in short-term, worldly, and finite pleasures or activities. In doing so, secular-minded people shirk the demands of spiritual development – part of which includes facing up to the fact that one partakes in the infinite. Directing some of one's activities towards the prospect of eternal life after death; or coming face to face with the idea that the

human being is created by a God, are some ways in which the eternal aspect of the self is recognised.<sup>47</sup>

Kierkegaard's analysis of Luther's reform and its, in his view, subsequent failure, shows that secular-mindedness is a constant temptation away from (and hence constant threat to) spiritual development. Kierkegaard's main source of acclaim for Luther was that he showed an unprecedented insight into the spiritual laxity that his contemporaries entertained (e.g., JP III, 2898). Nevertheless, Kierkegaard's chief accusation against Luther is that he was naïvely unaware of the ever-present threat of secular-mindedness with regards to spiritual development. Kierkegaard ultimately concludes that the *political* aspect of Luther's reform became a temptation away from inward, spiritual reform and towards a secular-minded zeal for policy-making. Hence, Kierkegaard claims that after his insightful diagnosis of the spiritual laxity of his peers, Luther inadvertently replaces one medium for spiritual negligence (falsely practised religion) with another (the false belief that zealous engagement in political affairs could cater for one's own and/or other's spiritual welfare).

Kierkegaard's critique of Luther is partly based on Kierkegaard's anthropological view of the human being and the role of the spiritual aspect of the self. In this critique, Kierkegaard elucidates both the role that the spiritual has with respect to the political, as well as the role it plays with regards to existential development. Hence

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<sup>47</sup> Kierkegaard, it should be emphasised, presupposes, or takes as a matter of faith, that the self is partly constituted by an eternal element. Kierkegaard is not exceptionally interested in securing *knowledge* or *proof* of the eternal aspect of the self, however. Not only does Kierkegaard think that this knowledge that could never be attained by humans even in principle but he also thinks that such knowledge attribution would be irrelevant with regards to one's existential development even if the former *was* possible. Thus, for example, Kierkegaard dismisses the task of seeking knowledge about the afterlife as irrelevant with regards to one's existential task of becoming a self (CD, 202-213). Presupposing, or taking as a matter of faith, that the self contains an infinite aspect is all that is needed for existential authenticity and/or religious practice.

Kierkegaard's anthropological views highlight additional aspects of his existential theory of the political, as well as inform his critique of Luther's reformation. A brief examination of this anthropology will thus be pertinent (in section 3.3.1). Once Kierkegaard's anthropological views have been assessed we will return to address Kierkegaard's ambivalent evaluation of Luther's politically implemented spiritual reform (in section 3.3.2).

### 3.3.1 Kierkegaard's Anthropology

Many of Kierkegaard's critical comments about Luther express misgivings with the latter's understanding of the dialectical and existential nature of the single individual, or humans more generally (JP II, 1484; JP III, 2470, 2474, 2512, 2514, 2522, 2541, 2543, 2556, 3218, cf. JP I, 710, 711; JP III, 2898). Kierkegaard claims that Luther did not sufficiently consider the existential repercussions of the political enforcement of his spiritual reform. Kierkegaard's anthropological views, on the other hand, point out how and why spiritual forfeiture is an ever-present and attractive temptation for human agents. Luther is partly criticised for not understanding or for overlooking these basic anthropological and existential facts. This key anthropological tenet is in the background of Kierkegaard's critique of Luther; but it also importantly informs his theory of the political. To gain a fuller understanding of Kierkegaard's anthropological and existential critique of Luther's reform we must therefore take a temporary detour and provide a cursory account of Kierkegaard's anthropology. The relation between Kierkegaard's anthropological views and his understanding of

Luther's reform (and hence, of a theory of the political more generally) will therefore be temporarily suspended in this section, but returned to in the following sub-section.

Kierkegaard's most fundamental anthropological belief is that all humans contain a physical, a psychical, and a spiritual aspect.<sup>48</sup> As Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author Vigilius Haufniensis puts it: "The human being is a synthesis of the psychical and the physical; however, a synthesis is unthinkable if the two are not united in a third. This third is spirit" (*The Concept of Anxiety* [hereafter simply; CA], 43). David J. Kangas notes that there is no given 'determinate or intrinsically ordered relation' between the physical and the psychical (Kangas, 2007, 177). The healthy relation of the two must be determined by each single individual. But it is precisely because the spiritual aspect of the self transcends the temporally contingent aspects of the self (e.g., biological determinations, cultural upbringing, and so on) that the single individual can *freely* engage in the task of becoming a self. Freedom is manifested when the individual, exercising the spiritual aspect of the self, attempts to harmonise the differing aspects of the self in a way that is individually suited to them. The spiritual aspect of the self does not just 'unite' the other aspects of the self then but also constitutes and sustains the psychical-physical synthesis (*ibid.*; CA, 81).

Without the spiritual aspect of the self, Kierkegaard states that there would be no freedom. Each human would essentially be determined by the psychical and physical aspects of the self – both of which are ultimately determined by historical contingencies which lie outside of the human agents control. If the spiritual relation

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<sup>48</sup> JP I, 52, 55, 56, 75, 78, 80, 83, 87; SUD, 176; *The Concept of Anxiety*; 43 (passim). See also, Grøn; [...]it is generally recognised that the definition of man as a synthesis is an essential – if not the essential – point in Kierkegaard's anthropology' (Grøn, 2000, 27); and Come, where the 'basic anthropological concept' that the human being is this tripartite synthesis is '[...] one of the ruling concepts in all of Kierkegaard's writings[from 1844 through to 1850]' (2000, 34. See also p. 33).

did not exist to freely appropriate and take responsibility for these contingencies then the person would ultimately be driven by circumstances for which he or she could not be held responsible for. As such, existential development would also cease to exist. The only development the individual would have would be in physical or psychical terms. Kierkegaard says that in such a scenario each individual would only develop as an instance or, to recall the original term used above, a 'specimen' of the human race.

But Kierkegaard claims that the human being is not merely a psychical-physical one. Each single individual has the capability to develop spiritually and existentially in ways that go above and beyond even the advancement of the race. As we hinted at above, however, Kierkegaard also believes there is a widespread tendency in humans to neglect the spiritual side of the self. If the spiritual aspect of the personality is responsible for providing us with freedom and the ability to authentically develop as an individual then why is it so commonly ignored?

One possible anthropological account of why the spiritual aspect is typically neglected might be due to the developmental nature of the human being. As Kierkegaard himself recognises, one needs consciousness and earnestness to be or become a spiritual person. Yet Kierkegaard also recognises that these faculties are only developed in the later years of a human's life.<sup>49</sup> Hence, before one reaches the age where the prerequisites for becoming a spiritual being can be attained, one will have already been primarily dominated by the 'temporal' aspects of the self which govern the child – the physical and the psychical. Since the human being must necessarily

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<sup>49</sup> Below we touch upon Kierkegaard's views on infant baptism and confirmation (section 6.2). There it is explicitly revealed that Kierkegaard thinks that the ceremony of confirmation, for example, should only take place between adults who are twenty-five years or older (see JP I, 494); precisely because one who is younger than this age cannot conceivably be expected to have the requisite faculties for genuinely accepting the religious way of life (see also: *The Moment*, 243-44).

pass through infancy and adolescence before arriving at adulthood, we might say that the physical element of the self originates and dominates first (in the infant); then the psychical (in the toddler/adolescent); and that the spiritual aspect of the self is the last to be developed (in the adult). The dominant role that the physical and psychical aspects of the self have in the formative years of a human's life could provide a plausible explanation for why the majority of adults may continue to be governed by non-spiritual interests.<sup>50</sup>

It must be admitted that Kierkegaard does not give such an anthropological account, or at least does not explicitly state it in such a way. Kierkegaard's anthropological account of the self is largely informed by Christian dogma. At times, for example, Kierkegaard's anthropology is informed by an interpretation of the Old Testament account of the creation and the subsequent fall of man. Whilst his 'Old Testament anthropology' is evident throughout the authorship, it tends to play a more dominant role in later journal entries. Kierkegaard's 'Old Testament anthropology' also typically provides a scriptural account of *psychical-physical* difference (for example, between the two sexes).<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, Kierkegaard also relies upon an interpretation

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<sup>50</sup> Kierkegaard also hints at the fact that social contingencies might bias the individual's view of selfhood towards the temporal. This will be examined in depth below in chapter five. See also: *Judge For Yourself!* [hereafter simply; JFY], 138) where one's relationship towards Christianity is (negatively) affected by a social change.

<sup>51</sup> When I quote Kierkegaard's use of the term 'man' in this thesis, I shall always understand it to mean mankind in general. Kierkegaard *does* offer a scriptural anthropology that seeks to explain the different 'natural qualifications' (JP IV, 5008) that belong to each sex, and that is based on the Biblical account of God's creation of man (Adam) and subsequent creation of woman (Eve) from man's side (JP IV, 5003, 5005). I will never be referring to this latter account, however; firstly because I do not believe that Kierkegaard's essentialist account of women is either informative or contradictory to anything I write in this thesis (including the general anthropological account that I shall sketch here). But additionally, I believe that Kierkegaard's Old-Testament anthropology is unfortunately irreparably sexist, even to the point of contradicting his New Testament anthropology. Whilst I cannot hope to treat this subject with the attention that it deserves here, I can point the reader to two excellent works that pursue these arguments. Celine León has written an impressive and detailed treatment of the inherently sexist aspect of Kierkegaard's anthropological thought: (León, 2008); and Wanda Warren Berry has convincingly argued that the essentialist aspects of Kierkegaard's are in stark contradiction to the existential, spiritually edifying aspects (Berry, 1997a, 53).

of the New Testament, and especially with the latter's emphasis on the *spiritual* equality between all humans. Furthermore, according Kierkegaard's interpretation of the New Testament, becoming a Christian is attained by 'becoming spirit'. Despite ultimately being scripturally-informed, Kierkegaard's anthropology is also fully complementary to the developmental account traced above – a point which I think he might find in favour of his scripturally based anthropology. (We shall see below that whilst Kierkegaard's frequently takes Biblical passages concerning anthropological questions as a matter of faith, he is nonetheless not shy of pointing towards what he takes to be reasonable empirical evidence to support those claims if and when he thinks that it can be provided.)

A key tenet of Kierkegaard's own anthropology then, one that is radically different to the account I postulated above, is that we are 'created by God' (JP I, 65). God originally composed us, Kierkegaard writes elsewhere, with a harmonious relationship between the temporal and the spiritual (JP I, 68, cf., *Sickness Unto Death* [hereafter simply; SUD], 16).<sup>52</sup> Kierkegaard also believes that the human being has a purpose or a *Telos*, and this is to return to the state of our original creation where we enjoyed a balanced relationship both between the various aspects of the self, and with God (JP I, 65).

In worldly existence, however, we experience a misrelationship with God (e.g.: JP III, 2418) and must strive to claim it back.<sup>53</sup> 'Man', Kierkegaard writes in another journal

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<sup>52</sup> Note then that Kierkegaard claims that the human being had a temporal aspect even before The Fall. God, on the other hand, is and always will be 'spirit' (*Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* [hereafter simply; UDVS], 192; JFY, 95; JP III, 2446, 2907. Sometimes Kierkegaard also calls God 'pure subjectivity' (e.g.: JP III, 2992)).

<sup>53</sup> Kierkegaard later gives an account of how man might once more 'resemble' God, through worship (UDVS, 193).



entry, 'is a fallen spirit who by way of punishment was degraded to being animal' (JP IV, 4349, cf.; JP VI, 6881, 6898). In one sense, the human being is quite obviously an animal. For Kierkegaard, however, the human being is also more than *just* an animal because spirit exists in the former but not in the latter. If a human was *merely* an animal they would not be able to feel humbled or humiliated by the fact that they are an animal (which, after all, is part of the punishment that God inflicts in the Genesis account of The Fall. See Genesis 3:10). Only a being that is both an animal *and* spirit can suffer such emotions as embarrassment (JP IV, 4349).<sup>54</sup> A purely animal being could not experience phenomena such as embarrassment, bashfulness, envy, shame, despair, or anxiety. It is, however, an irrefutable anthropological fact that human beings can and often do suffer such emotions. This can only be accounted for, Kierkegaard argues, by recognising that the human is both a spiritual and animalistic being.

Despite the fact that we were originally created by God in an ordered relationship we are born into the world in a state of misrelationship. In another journal entry Kierkegaard shows how his anthropology of 'man' is not entirely based on the account of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. For Kierkegaard also notes that: '[...] *according to the New Testament*, no man is born as spirit, and after the natural birth to be man is to be body and mind' (JP IV, 4363, my emphasis, cf. JP IV, 3996 ("[...] men are primarily animal."); 3967). By the time that the single individual reaches the requisite age to become spirit it is likely that the finite aspects of the self will have already governed and overburdened the spiritual side of the

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<sup>54</sup> Once again, I believe that Kierkegaard would be pleased to see that his scripturally based anthropology accounts for brute, empirical facts about the nature of human life, as well as unites these facts with Christian dogma. Kierkegaard's comments about the nature of other phenomena such as bashfulness (JP I, 78; CA, 43-44), despair (SUD, 16) and envy (JP III, 2986) continue the argument that these experiences could only exist in a being who is both spiritual and part animal.

individual. Hence, the decision to 'become spirit' is a radical break to the physical-psychical development that will have dominated the single individual's experience of the world hitherto. In addition to this, satisfying one's spiritual demands can potentially involve physical-psychical 'suffering'. For this reason, the realisation that one ought to 'become spirit' is one that puts the single individual into a state of 'crisis' (JP IV, 4363, cf., JP III, 2915, 2917 ("By nature man is against the Christianity of the New Testament."), 2919, 2920, 2921).

We can now understand why attempting to achieve the harmonious relationship that we were originally created in (and which is, after all, the *Telos* of the human being) might be difficult. It is both unnatural - given our 'natural' upbringing from infancy to adulthood - as well as difficult and potentially painful. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard believes that becoming an authentic self is not just a possibility for each single individual but also the very purpose of existence. Aside from the religious implications of becoming the self that God designed us to be, becoming an authentic self also has ethical implications. The only way that a person can become an ethical agent is to exert one's spirit and to choose to refrain from being governed by temporality alone. The ethically responsible human being must cease to be solely governed by factually given psychical and physical determinants. The responsible agent recognises that rather than being the only possible cause of human behaviour (which would otherwise lead to a deterministic outlook), temporal factors and contingencies can be transcended by the freely willing and responsible ethical agent. Kierkegaard believes that the possibility for free action, and perhaps the phenomenal evidence for it too, provides the individual with the first intimation that they are a spiritual being *as well as* a psychical-physical one. Becoming spirit is therefore an

ethical and religious 'task' - or a 'claim' that is asked of each one of us as a single individual.<sup>55</sup>

To take stock then: the natural state that the individual finds his or herself in is one where the temporal aspects of the self, the psychical and physical, are inharmoniously domineering. To continue to live in such a state, despite reaching the age where spiritual development becomes a possibility (and a 'task') is to live as a 'natural-man', or as Kierkegaard puts it in another, even more derogatory way, as a merely 'animal-creature'. Individuals that live in this way, however, do not and indeed could not ever become *only* animals (- not even *very cognitively advanced* animals). If a human was ever *only* an animal then there could be no question of existential and spiritual development. There is, however, always the potentiality to develop existentially because asserting the spiritual aspect of the self to overcome any temporal determinant is an ever-present potentiality of every human being. Hence, Kierkegaard states that the spiritual aspect of the self is *dormant* in the 'natural-man'. No matter how hard one might try to ignore the spiritual aspect of their self they will fail, because it simply cannot be extirpated.<sup>56</sup>

When, in the mature stage of each single individual's life, the potential requisite level of self-consciousness, willpower, and understanding are present in the single individual, he or she will be endowed with the ability to willingly and mindfully undertake the spiritual task of *becoming* a self. The single individual will then have to

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<sup>55</sup> References to the task of becoming spirit abound Kierkegaard's authorship, both explicitly and implicitly. For examples of the former, see CA, 49; *Christian Discourses*, 254; SUD, 176; JP I, 65, 78, 84, 86; JP III, 2907.

<sup>56</sup> Note also that the temporal aspects of the self (the psychical and physical) cannot be extirpated either, as I will discuss shortly.

address the fact that they have hitherto been largely governed by the psychical-physical aspects of the self.<sup>57</sup>

Overcoming the tyrannical rule of the psychical-physical aspects of the self is unfortunately an exceptionally difficult task. Kierkegaard understands this, and also recognises that being one-sidedly ruled by the psychical-physical aspects of the self is the most primal condition that the mature single individual will find his or herself in. This is only made increasingly difficult by the fact that being governed by the psychical-physical aspects of the self is also the most sensuously preferable and easy form of existing (JP IV, 4359, for example). An individual living in such a way wishes to deny (consciously or not) that the self partakes in an infinite, spiritual aspect and hence wishes to forfeit the task of becoming an authentic self.

One of Kierkegaard's most famous philosophical tenets is his theory of the three existential spheres or stages of life: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious.<sup>58</sup> In line with forfeiting existential development, neglecting the spiritual aspect of the self (again, consciously or unconsciously) entails that the single individual remains within the aesthetic state of existence. We might say that this way of existing is the 'default' state that an individual finds his or herself in. But it is also the most inauthentic and spiritually deficient way of life. Such an individual refrains from becoming a truly

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<sup>57</sup> As the above paragraph highlights, however, the spiritual aspect of the self is ever-present. Since ignoring the spiritual part of the self is also one way of relating to it, the individual who thinks that she or he is solely governed by the psychical-physical aspects of the self is, in fact, still relating to the spiritual (see, on this note, SUD, 25; JP I, 749). In this case, the spiritual aspect of the self is still, from a Christian point of view, 'governing' the individual's actions from 'behind the scenes', as it were. I thank Dr. Graham M. Smith for bringing this point to my attention.

<sup>58</sup> As they are a crucial underlying tenet of his philosophy, Kierkegaard's theory of the stages is discussed extensively throughout his literature. For a full list of references in Kierkegaard's works to the theory of the stages see Hong, H., and Hong, E.'s list of references in the notes to the section 'Stages' that is found in Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers*, vol. IV: p. 702.

ethically responsible agent, desiring instead to be governed by the historically contingent and temporal.

This anthropological view therefore links Kierkegaard's view of the spiritual aspect of the self with existential development. Gregor Malantschuk has excellently summed up the relationship between Kierkegaard's anthropology and existential development in a way that is a fitting conclusion to the account I have sketched above. Hence, I quote at length:

A human being begins his life as a natural entity, inasmuch as he [or she] is completely bound by the givens of nature that constitute him [or her]. He [or she] lives in the now and reacts altogether spontaneously, ignorant of good and evil. This is [a human's] innocent condition. By reflection he [or she] rises above the now and begins to form a concept of past and future. It is on this level that anxiety awakens in a [person]; it is a sign that he [or she] is about to lose his [or her] secure anchoring in nature and find the first intimations of his [or her] freedom. This is the beginning of the *esthetic stage*. Characteristic of this stage, [the person] still hangs on continually to the external, to the temporal. [The person] is living in what the pseudonymous writer Vigilius Haufniensis calls a 'synthesis of the psychic and the physical' [CA, 39, ed. tr.]; the spiritual is still present only as possibility. In the esthetic stage heredity and milieu play the important roles, because on that level the individual lacks spirit as the guiding factor." (Malantschuk, cited in: JP I, p.696. Original emphasis.)

From an analysis of Kierkegaard's anthropological view we see how the spiritual and the existential are linked – a relation that has only been hinted at hitherto. It is only because the spiritual aspect of the self exists and provides the single individual with the ability to freely establish a relationship between the physical, psychical, and spiritual aspects of the self that existential development is made possible. How one

regards and relates to the spiritual aspect of the self will determine whether one remains living an aesthetic way of life, or whether one develops ethico-religiously.

Kierkegaard's anthropological account of the self also informs his views regarding the relation of the spiritual to the temporal and the political – something that we saw was an important factor of his existential theory of the political discussed above. Finally, Kierkegaard's anthropology explains some of his criticisms of Luther's politically implemented reform and highlights as to why Kierkegaard diverges from this position with regards to spiritual or existential reform. Hence, an analysis of Kierkegaard's ambivalent reception of Luther's reform will highlight aspects of Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political that have not yet been examined.

### 3.3.2 Luther: Kierkegaard's case study of spiritual reform.

Kierkegaard's opinion of Luther's reform is ambivalent but largely negative. On the one hand, Kierkegaard thinks that Luther's understanding of Christianity is excellent. Kierkegaard praises Luther for detecting the spiritual laxity in his own contemporaries and highlighting the need for spiritual reformation. Ultimately, however, Kierkegaard argues that Luther lacked awareness of the existential ramifications of his own attempt at solving the spiritual crisis he had so expertly identified. This failing led Luther to condone a political solution to a spiritual or existential problem which ultimately resulted in a situation as dire (perhaps even more so) than the one Luther had originally intended to remedy (JP I, 711; JP II, 1135; JP III, 2682; cf., JP II, 2125).

The problematic relationship between the political and the spiritual that Kierkegaard discovers in Luther's reform informs Kierkegaard's views of the legitimate means and ends of politics, and on the proper methodology and solution to an existential shortcoming. Hence, Kierkegaard's examination of Luther's own failed attempt at existential reformation via political means informs Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political.

As has been mentioned, Kierkegaard's appraisal of Luther is highly ambivalent. In one of his earliest comments on Luther, Kierkegaard approvingly cites Luther's distinction between Christ as the 'pattern' [*Exempel*] (or prototype) and Christ as the redeemer (JP III: 2503). The Middle-Age's relation to the religious, Kierkegaard believed, was one too narrowly focussed upon the notion that Christ is to be emulated (i.e., Christ as the 'pattern'). Whilst this aspect is certainly an important element of the Christian tradition, Kierkegaard believed that over-emphasising this aspect of Christ led Christians in the Middle-Ages to neglect a second, equally important aspect of Christ (i.e., Christ as the redeemer).

Kierkegaard accuses the Middle-Ages of believing that if one lived in a way that imitated Christ's then, like Christ, one would secure an eternal life after death. Kierkegaard notes that living a life of monasticism, or giving a specific amount of money to charity were examples of ways that people in the Middle-Ages thought that they could achieve religiosity. As these examples show, however, this 'Middle-Age mentality' neglects the need to pursue inward and spiritual development. The Middle-age approach to religious improvement implied that it could be attained by increasing the quality or quantity of the ceremonious activities one did in God's name; or by

increasing the amount of charity one gave to one's church or neighbour. One need not consult one's conscience about spiritual matters but only authoritative sources. Kierkegaard believes, however, that being a truly spiritual being requires much mental anguish and diligence. That the Christians of the Middle-Ages lacked this altogether is proof for Kierkegaard that they (inadvertently or not) ignored at least some of their essential spiritual demands.

Luther's revolution was in highlighting the fact that religiosity cannot be secured by external practices alone (JP III; 2504, 2528). For Kierkegaard, Luther re-emphasises the fact that one does not become *eo ipso* religious by undertaking practices that are deemed by external sources to be religious. In fact, Kierkegaard goes farther than Luther in extenuating the fact that true emulation of Christ would also entail all of the hardships that Christ suffered including martyrdom; and almost *no* person is willing or able to emulate Christ to *that* degree (e.g., JP III; 2504, 2974). Given the fact that human beings are at least in some regard temporal, finite beings, we must also remember that we could never live up to the infinite demands that God makes of us; (*Christian Discourses* [hereafter simply; CD], 299; UDVS, 151; *Works of Love* [hereafter simply; WOL], 132, 190).<sup>59</sup> Due to God's infinite love, however, we can hope for God's forgiveness. That is to say, Christ is also our redeemer. Both aspects of Christ are important aspects of the Christian tradition in their own right - but over-emphasis on either could also inadvertently serve as the medium of spiritual laxity.

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<sup>59</sup> This problem of living up to the 'infinite demands' that a belief in a Deity entails is defined as 'guilt-consciousness' and is a necessary feature of *all* genuine religions *Concluding Unscientific Postscript – Volume I* [hereafter simply; CUP], 526, *passim*; see also Mulhall, 1994, 74; Lee, 2006, 191-194, 217). The notion that God demonstrated his infinite love and interest in our salvation, by becoming a finite, historical being (Christ) and suffering for us in this world, is a concept that is specific to Christianity. The individual who recognises that one stands in this relation to the Christian God is said to suffer 'sin-consciousness' which is a specifically *Christian* phenomenon (see: CUP, 584; *Practice in Christianity*, 68; SUD, 120; TM, 238, JP I, 452, 926; JP III, 2461; JP IV, 4020, 4021, 4026, 4035, 4039, 4472).



This latter fact informs us about why a healthy balance between the two must be maintained.

With regards to these two aspects of Christianity, Kierkegaard approvingly cites an epigram that he attributes to Luther: 'The world is like a drunken peasant; if you help him up on one side of the horse, he falls off on the other side' (FSE, 24).<sup>60</sup> The epigram is from '*Table Talks*' [*Tischreden*], a collection of fragments from some of the conversations that took place in Martin Luther's household. As is rather typical with the '*Table Talks*' collection as a whole, and even more so of Veit Dietrich's recordings (especially this one), no clue to the context of the epigram is given, bar the date. Hence Kierkegaard has more freedom than ever to appropriate the quote for his own purposes; an activity that perpetually characterises Kierkegaard's style of reading and annotation. (Noting this trend, Heiko Schulz has amusingly characterised Kierkegaard's unique reading style as 'appropriation by productive misunderstanding' (Schulz, 2010a, 81).)

'Productively appropriating' this epigram, Kierkegaard takes it to mean that the world is like a drunken peasant.<sup>61</sup> At one moment the peasant is falling to the left – someone

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<sup>60</sup> Howard and Edna Hong, the translators and editors of the twenty-six volume publication edition of 'Kierkegaard's Writings' (mentioned above, §2.1), note that they could not find the original source for this epigram. The original is piece #630 of '*Table Talks*'. Entry #630 was recorded by Veit Dietrich in the Autumn of 1533. The English version given is: 'The world is like a drunken peasant. If you lift him into the saddle on one side, he will fall off again on the other side. One can't help him no matter how one tries. He wants to be the Devil's': in vol. 54, p. 111 of the 55 volume 'Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press' edition of Luther's Collected works. Note that Kierkegaard misquotes slightly – the original does not mention a 'horse'. Additionally, Kierkegaard explicitly attributes the quote to 'Luther'. In all likelihood it was stated by Luther but this is not certain beyond a doubt. In any case, Luther never *wrote* the epigram himself, strictly speaking. Perhaps this is why Howard and Edna Hong failed to trace Kierkegaard's translation of the quote when their editorial work is otherwise most frequently magnificent.

<sup>61</sup> I will assess what Kierkegaard takes to be *Luther's* use of the epigram below. It is important to note, however, that Kierkegaard extends the use of the epigram for his own purposes. In fact, in taking the epigram its logical conclusions Kierkegaard ultimately uses it in formulating a critique of Luther's attempt at reform, as I shall show below.

puts him/her straight again – and now he/she is falling to the right. We might think that the potentiality for the peasant to fall one way or the other is the constant threat of the temptation that the single individual faces to forfeit their spiritual task. As we saw above, the constant threat of a temptation away from spiritual progression is a fundamental aspect of Kierkegaard's general anthropological view of the self.

In the first part of the work *Judge for Yourself!*, Kierkegaard links the epigram with his anthropological view. Kierkegaard explains that the majority of people are 'drunk' with worldliness and need to become sober. Individuals are drunk, Kierkegaard argues, because they become so immersed in activity that relates to externals (as opposed to inward development) that they fail to relate to the spiritual, infinite aspect of the self. In Kierkegaard's words:

In any other knowledge [than earnestly understanding the relation of the self to God] you are away from yourself, you forget yourself, are absent from yourself. [...] To forget oneself, to come, not to, but to go away from oneself [...] [f]rom the Christian point of view, this is intoxication.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, is it not so, do we not say that the person who is addicted to the use of strong drink forgets himself, is drowning himself or his self?' (JFY, 105).

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<sup>62</sup> In this context, as in many of Kierkegaard's comments pertaining to religiosity, Kierkegaard specifically discusses Christianity. For Kierkegaard, some features of Christianity, whilst having conceptual counterparts in other religions, are nevertheless qualitatively different and specific to Christianity. Such concepts include the inherent sinfulness of the human, and the notion of God's grace. Kierkegaard believes that these exclusively Christian concepts best account for the anthropological account of the human and its existential task of becoming a self that Kierkegaard describes elsewhere. Nevertheless, many of the statements that Kierkegaard discusses with Christianity explicitly in mind, this one included, can also be applied to his view of spiritual progression in general. I will note when concepts specific to Christianity and not religiosity in general are being discussed. When no such qualification is made, however, it will be because I take what Kierkegaard says about Christianity to apply to religiosity more generally as well.

As the text continues Kierkegaard implies that this 'drunkenness' (read as: 'secular-mindedness', I argue) is a fundamental part of being human (*ibid.*, 113). What does Kierkegaard mean, however, when he says that a person could 'drown his or her self'? The full implications of the quote only make sense, I suggest, by recalling Kierkegaard's anthropological account of the self. Kierkegaard seems to be arguing that the temporal, physic-psychical aspect of the self overpowers and hence 'crowds out' the spiritual part of the self. For Kierkegaard, however, exercising the spiritual part of the self (in the right way) is what allows an individual to become a genuine, authentic, or 'true' self. Hence, becoming drunken with temporality drowns out the (true) self.

In the quote, Kierkegaard also restates the argument that engagements in temporal (and this includes 'worldly') affairs are sensuously pleasurable and perhaps even soothingly so. Engagement with political affairs need not be an exception, and can indeed be a kind of aesthetic enjoyment (JP VI, 4359). *Engrossment* in worldly affairs of any type, however, (rather than mere *engagement*) necessarily distances the single individual from spiritual development. Such a person neglects the spiritual aspect of the self and (consciously or not) allows his or herself to be overcome by the temporal part(s) of his or her self. In such a situation the spirit fails to constitute, sustain and harmonise the temporal and spiritual aspects of the self, and so the 'drunken' person is, consciously or not, engaged in a misrelation of the self. Hence, an individual who is constantly 'drunken' with worldliness is systematically failing to be or become a true self. The temporal part of the self crowds out, or 'drowns' out (to stick with the epigram) the spiritual aspect of the self.

Despite the fact that Luther's comment about the world being a drunken peasant would appear to lend itself to Kierkegaard's anthropological belief that the default position for an individual to find his or her self in is 'drunkenness' (read: spiritual poverty or laxity), it must be admitted that Kierkegaard does not actually use the epigram in this way. Notwithstanding the fact that it is not explicitly mentioning it in this context, however, the epigram does lie at the heart of Kierkegaard's view of the relationship between the spiritual and the temporal. Ironically then, the epigram contributes to one of Kierkegaard's arguments against Luther's reform. We will examine this aspect of the epigram in more detail below. For now I will pursue the occasions where Kierkegaard does explicitly link the epigram with Luther's reform and with Luther's view of Christianity.

Kierkegaard believes that *Luther's* use of the epigram (for we have examined *Kierkegaard's* use above, and will return to it once again below) is that the world ('drunken peasant') may lean too far towards 'one side' (aspect) of Christianity - the notion of Christ the example – or too far to the 'other side' - of Christ the redeemer. According to this reading Luther believed that the imitative aspect of Christ, 'Christ as example', became too one-sidedly emphasised in Middle-age conceptions of Christianity. The biased conception of Christianity allowed for spiritual laxity that nevertheless maintained the illusion that true Christianity was being practised. Luther's corrective reform to this situation consisted in emphasising the other aspect of Christianity – that of Christ the redeemer.

Kierkegaard's view of true Christianity is one where both of the two aspects of Christ are maintained and emphasised:

Christianity's requirement is this: your life should express works as strenuously as possible; then one more thing is required – that you humble yourself and confess: But my being saved is nevertheless grace. (FSE, 17).<sup>63</sup>

In other words, Kierkegaard believes that true Christianity requires both that one whole-heartedly apply ones' religion in external practices including rituals and Christian works, but also that one admits that this alone will not guarantee safe passage into heaven. The problem with the Middle-age conception of Christianity was that it believed that Christian works were judged meritoriously, so that so many works secured eternal bliss. Such a judgement is, according to Kierkegaard, actually a 'secular' way of thinking. As Kierkegaard notes, a secular-minded approach to meritorious works would most likely think the following; 'if the works are no guarantor for eternal bliss, if they must inevitably fail to meet the infinite requirements that God's love demands, and if one must ultimately rely on God's good grace no matter what, then why would the single individual undertake Christian works?' Seen from a worldly perspective, undertaking such works would be 'foolishness'.

Seen from this light, Luther actually battled against a specific manifestation of 'worldliness', 'secular-mindedness', or a widespread over-emphasis of the 'temporal' aspect of life. The Middle-age concept of Christianity (read: spirituality) was one

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<sup>63</sup> See also JP II, 1482: "If I were to define Christian perfection, I should not say that it is a perfection of striving but specifically that it is the deep recognition of the *imperfection of one's striving* [and I would add the 'success' of one's works also], and precisely because of this a deeper and deeper consciousness of the need for grace, not grace for this or that, but *the infinite need infinitely for grace* [...]" (original emphasis).

where inward development was neglected and where religiosity could be attained by a matter of quantitative calculation; so many 'works' making the afterlife more or less guaranteed. The idea that 'religious' works were ostensibly practised with an expectation of the reward of an afterlife is, according to Kierkegaard, not actually evidence of religiosity at all though.

In response to this false understanding of Christianity Luther emphasised God's grace. The fact that one only achieved the eternal life by receiving God's grace thereby opened up the possibility of producing religious works simply for their own sake. It also encouraged the single individual to strive *inwardly*, to attempt to become as worthy as God's grace as one could be, and to work to interpret God's word and apply it in one's own life, rather than thoughtlessly following established, ceremonious practices.

If Luther was struggling against a kind of secular-mindedness that passed itself off as spirituality then Kierkegaard believed that his own age was equally in need of a reform – albeit, Kierkegaard was fighting against an over-emphasis of 'inward grace' rather than 'external action' (JP II, 1135, 2125, 2127; JP III, 2359. cf. JP II, 1226, 2119). Luther's reformation, Kierkegaard lamented, had ultimately only resorted in Kierkegaard's contemporaries over-emphasising the aspect of Christ as 'the redeemer'. Luther's emphasis on grace was accommodated by worldly shrewdness and taken to the opposite extreme which resulted in a version of Christianity that was just as untrue as the false religion of the Middle-age. In Kierkegaard's times, making Lutheranism the state religion only led to a situation where people emphasised grace so much that practising religious works became completely ignored. People too hastily admitted the

futility of human endeavour with regards to securing the afterlife. Hence, one's religious salvation, it was (over)emphasised, was solely secured by practising self-effacement before God and seeking His good grace. It was erroneously thought that Luther's reform had shown that practising works of faith, or imitating Christ, were futile performances because they could never secure religious salvation on their own. Kierkegaard would agree that works alone are no guarantor for salvation (e.g., JFY, 193); but he would disagree with the conclusion that this therefore makes them altogether futile. Kierkegaard's vision of true Christianity is one where the individual is continually asked to perform religious works that are nevertheless no guarantee of the afterlife (FSE, 17; JP II, 1482).

Kierkegaard's discussion of Luther's reform hence presents us with one more argument for resisting a politically implemented solution to a spiritual problem. As we have touched upon above, and as Kierkegaard openly states, 'There is always a secular mentality' that is willing to pass itself off for religiosity when really it is worldliness (FSE, 16). That is to say, there is a widespread tendency in humans to shirk from spiritual development and instead to seek to cater for the temporal aspects of the self. If a spiritual reform is ever needed then it is likely to be because the typical single individual encountered is neglecting the spiritual aspect of the self. Politics, Kierkegaard maintains throughout his authorship, works with finite, quantitative means and affects worldly change. As we have seen above, Kierkegaard does not believe that politics is fitted for or capable of instituting spiritual reform.

What Kierkegaard's anthropology and his examination of the faults of Luther's reform show is that a secular mentality will always prefer to engage in political

(worldly) affairs than in spiritual development. Attempting to solve a spiritual problem with political means is likely to fail for an additional reason then. If individuals are in need of spiritual deepening then the natural reaction to a call for spiritual reform that is being implemented politically is to become engrossed in political issues. Hence Kierkegaard criticises Luther for turning to political means to solve a spiritual problem. The result of the political element of Lutheranism only led Kierkegaard's own contemporaries to adopt an over-zealous view of the powers of politics in solving existential matters. An individual in need of spiritual deepening is likely to see political alterations in external affairs (in the official state religion for example) as a cure to their spiritual sickness. Since the problem stems from spiritual laxity, a view that external changes have cured one's sickness is ironically likely to tempt the individual away from a true cure of inward, spiritual deepening.

As we might expect from an analysis of Luther, Kierkegaard's concluding comments are frequently concerned with Christianity. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard does also (if only rarely) consider religion more generally in his examination of the reformation. In fact, much of Kierkegaard's analysis of Christianity (including Danish Lutheranism) also applies to spirituality more generally, especially with regards to the relationship between the spiritual and the political.

Whilst highlighting the difference between Christianity and secular shrewdness, for example, Kierkegaard frequently emphasises that *all* religiosity essentially works in the opposite direction of worldly shrewdness (JFY, 99-100, cf. JP I, 75; JP IV,



4348).<sup>64</sup> Hence, Kierkegaard concedes that religiosity, or spirituality in general, is conceptually differentiated from practical, temporal care and wellbeing (JP IV, 4336, 4348, 4354, 4359). Kierkegaard's case-study of Lutheranism shows how the remedy to a particular manifestation of spiritual impoverishment was sought in institutional, political changes rather than authentic, inward development. Luther's spiritual reform failed because it was implemented in the wrong way, i.e. politically, and without continual attention to the expected existential appropriation of the reform. (In other words, Luther's reform was 'undialectical'.) That the same dialectical relationship between spirituality and worldliness is to be found in all cases of spiritual negligence – not just Luther's – is highlighted by both Kierkegaard's anthropological tenets and his existential theory of the political. Hence, attempts at solving existential problems with political means is likely to only lead the impoverished individual into further over-engagement with worldly affairs at the risk of neglecting spiritual deepening.

As mentioned above, Kierkegaard did think that his own age had erroneously over-emphasised the redeeming aspect of Christ. One might think it contradictory for Kierkegaard to have used much of his later authorship to re-emphasise the imitative aspect of Christ. Is this not just a case of 'pushing' the peasant in the opposite direction to which he/she presently slumps? Did Kierkegaard not himself recognise that political reform cannot be the cure for spiritual impoverishment? An external

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<sup>64</sup> In a late journal entry Kierkegaard pushes this point: "Every call from God is always addressed to one person, the single individual;[...] Everything which makes its appearance statistically is not from above;[i.e., not from God...] you can be sure it is from below. This statistical approach is a slyness which wants to escape from rigorousness, the spirit-rigorousness of being spirit, and, using numbers, operates materialistically [i.e., psychic-physically] (JP I: 238). See also: JP III, 2997, where: "The life of the religious person [i.e., not just the Christian] is the most intensive agony" simply because "becoming involved with God" in *any* genuine way is excruciatingly difficult. Finally: JP IV, 4340 also emphasis that all forms of the spiritual life require 'self-renunciation'. Kierkegaard even supposes that if one genuinely practices self-renunciation to 'a false conception of God' one still might have more spirit than the person who 'has the most correct scholarly and speculative knowledge of [the true] God but whose knowledge exercises no power at all over his life' (*ibid.*).

reform that 'pushes' the drunken peasant 'upright' is surely only a temporary solution - the peasant will inevitably only slump over to the other side, making the reform ultimately ineffective.

How does Kierkegaard respond to the spiritual impoverishment that he believes his own contemporaries to be affected by then? If we look at Kierkegaard's work *Judge for Yourself!* we see that the second part of the book is named 'Christ as the Prototype, or No One Can Serve Two Masters'. As is to be expected, Kierkegaard re-emphasises the prototypical aspect of Christ in light of the fact that he sees the negligence of this aspect of Christianity as the biggest obstacle to spiritual development in his particular time and place. What is worth noting, however, is that the first part of the work is called 'Becoming Sober'. Though Luther's epigram is not explicitly mentioned, the analogy has been appropriated and is at the heart of the text. Thus we find that near the end of the text Kierkegaard writes, in a way that I have hoped by now to have shown is characteristic of his thought, that in order to halt the spiritual impoverishment of his times what is needed is not external reform but an inward change – or sobriety.

As Kierkegaard developed his theory of the political, he learned from his examination of Luther that a spiritual reform must be directed to producing inward development in the 'single individual'. For Kierkegaard, political reform will not tackle the ever-present risk of spiritual forfeiture using external means, and *on masse*. Political reform itself is a secular affair that ultimately risks becoming one more temporal 'pleasure' or worldly 'profit' for the spiritually impoverished individual to enjoy (JFY, 131).

Instead, Kierkegaard frequently notes that his own task must be one of producing 'inward reform' (JP III: 2510, 2515, 2546, 2552; cf., 2929). Rather than wanting to *amend* the spiritual laxity present within a given situation with altering externals (i.e., to 'push' the drunken peasant aright), Kierkegaard's task is in attempting to make his readers *become aware* of the fact that the spiritual laxity exists as a perpetual threat to authentic development. In other words, Kierkegaard wishes to 'sober up' the single individual by first highlighting their spiritual impoverishment before asking the single individual to make an honest consideration and admission of the extent to which spiritual laxity exists in his or her own life.<sup>65</sup>

In the section of *Judge for Yourselves!* titled 'Becoming Sober', Kierkegaard calls for an admission from the reader that the current state of affairs in Denmark has strayed somewhat from the ideally Christian. Therefore, Kierkegaard asks the reader to admit that the degree to which ordinary Danish citizens imitate Christ is far from the New Testament ideal. Despite the fact that Kierkegaard believed the Middle-Ages conception of rituals and works to have ultimately been misguided, he nevertheless respects the earnestness and degree to which Middle-age Christians were willing to at least try to imitate Christ. In fact, Kierkegaard laments that this crucial aspect of Christianity is lacking in his own times.<sup>66</sup> A 'secular-minded' (mis)interpretation of Luther's reform had been used to justify temporal welfare instead of an engagement in spiritual deepening.

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<sup>65</sup> Cf., JP III, 2881: "The method [that Kierkegaard's spiritually destitute contemporaries used to attain 'religiosity'] is to leave out the existentially strenuous passages in the New Testament. [...] I think that it is better to take them along, to acknowledge that these qualifications are found in the New Testament - and then make confession of our weakness." Cf., *ibid.*, 2886, 2902.

<sup>66</sup> Kierkegaard's emphasis on the necessity of 'Works of Love' is analysed in chapter seven below, and is part of my central argument that Kierkegaard's political and social thought is not impotent with regards to external change.

It can be seen that Kierkegaard's suggested solution to the spiritual impoverishment he perceived in Denmark is in-line with the theory of the political that he had previously developed. Kierkegaard gives an additional reason for believing that the mixture of spirituality and politics is likely only to be 'disastrous'. Kierkegaard shows how it might always be tempting to advocate spiritual reform with political means. But Kierkegaard's analysis of Luther's own reform, as well as his anthropological view of the spiritual and temporal aspects of the human self, led him to see political means as ultimately inept solutions to spiritual and existential problems.

It should be noted that just as in the previous two sections we saw that Kierkegaard does not condemn politics *per se* but more accurately the catastrophic mixing of the political and the existential, a reform like Luther's is likewise not considered blameworthy simply because it tempts people into an engagement with political, worldly affairs. If this were the case, then Kierkegaard would presumably have to criticise any and every call for political activism. This view of Kierkegaard's position is untenable firstly because Kierkegaard plainly sees any increase in our temporal wellbeing as *ceteris paribus* a good thing, as we have seen above; and secondly, because Kierkegaard himself called out for a political change in his final writings. We will analyse the justifications that Kierkegaard gave for such political involvement in chapter six below.

A final reason that Kierkegaard could not disagree with political action *per se* is to do with his anthropological beliefs. As we noted above, Luther's call for reform could be seen (inadvertently or not) as a rallying cry for involvement in worldly, political

affairs. We also noted that becoming engrossed in catering for the temporal aspect of the self is an ever present threat to spiritual development. Nevertheless, nowhere in Kierkegaard's anthropology is an engagement the temporal aspect of the self *in and of itself* criticised. On the contrary, Kierkegaard is always concerned with keeping a healthy relation between the varying aspects of the self, the temporal aspect included. There is no reason not to think that a single individual could not be constantly engaged with the demands of being a spiritual self as well as maintaining an interest in political reformation (for the security of temporal goods such as civil liberties for example). Kierkegaard would only criticise an *engrossment* in temporal affairs.

In fact, in his most detailed work on anthropology, *Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author 'Anti-Climacus' has a section called 'Infinitude's Despair Is to lack Finitude'. The same author calls despair 'a sickness of the spirit, of the self'. Hence, to lack finitude is a form of a sickness of the self or of the spirit (SUD, 30-32).<sup>67</sup> The desire to ignore or extirpate the temporal, finite aspect of the self will therefore also only lead to an imbalanced and unhealthy relationship to one's self.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> It should also be noted that despair, the sickness of the spirit, takes three forms: 'in despair not to be conscious of having a self; in despair not to will to be oneself; [and] in despair to will to be oneself'. The text clearly states that 'not to be conscious of having a self', in particular, in having an eternal aspect of the self [spirit] is also a form of despair of the self. Anti-Climacus' example of this form of despair highlights how widespread secular-mindedness is not only evidence of a large-scale spiritual sickness but can even 'drag' other people into despair: This 'kind of despair [despair not to be conscious of having a self] seems to permit itself to be tricked out of its self by "the others." 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 easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man' (SUD, 32).

<sup>68</sup> This might inform Kierkegaard's criticism of monasticism (see his journal entries on the matter: JP III, 2745-2765. See also: WOL, 144, 146; JFY, 15, 192-3). Stephen Evans has also argued that Kierkegaard's criticism of monasticism is directly related to his disapproval of the practice of Christianity in the Middle-Ages (1989, 166).

Similarly, Kierkegaard frequently maintained that even aesthetic 'sensuousness' could be unified with the spiritual, if the single individual brought the two aspects of the self into a well-balanced relation. Hence, Kierkegaard later writes that the Christian practice of neighbour love is "specifically intended [...] for transforming sensuous-love and friendship" – transforming, we should note, in such a way that neither the sensuous nor the spiritual aspect are annihilated but both preserved in union.<sup>69</sup> Thus Kierkegaard also writes: "[...] in loving yourself, *preserve* love for neighbour; in sensuous-love and friendship, *preserve* love for neighbour" (WOL, 62, my emphasis; cf., 112).

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<sup>69</sup> See also (CA, 80) where Haufniensis describes how 'sensuousness is transfigured in spirit [so, not annihilated]' (Cited in: Come, 2000, 27). Arnold Come cites and discusses both these two references and the next, and so serves as an important source of inspiration for my interpretation.

### 3.4 Concluding remarks.

I have attempted to use three distinct areas of Kierkegaard's authorship to highlight Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political. Some of the claims we have seen Kierkegaard make above are essential components of his theory of the political and are, as such, constantly defended throughout his authorship. A list of such claims will be a helpful reference point and will be given below. From this list, a re-assessment of Kierkegaard's theory of the political (drawn from constant theoretical commitments within the three bodies of text examined above) will also be provided (immediately below in section 3.4.1).

Despite the constancies of his theory of the political, Kierkegaard also gives many nuanced and differing arguments about the *importance* of maintaining his theory of the political. Kierkegaard outlines numerous dangerous consequences of ignoring the pivotal tenets of his theory of the political; and these unfortunate consequences are highlighted with regards to numerous differing social and political circumstances. I hope to have highlighted some particularly illustrative nuances of Kierkegaard's theory of the political whilst lamenting the fact that not all such subtleties could have been addressed.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> If the reader is familiar with Kierkegaard's authorship and has felt as though some of the discussion above could tie in to other aspects of it I would not be surprised. I would tentatively suggest that this supports my belief that Kierkegaard was too active a mind not to have been considering how every aspect of his thought related to questions regarding the political.

### 3.4.1 Key tenets of Kierkegaard's theory of the political

From the above analysis of some of Kierkegaard's works we can identify the essential components of Kierkegaard's theory of the political. Firstly, we saw that in each work Kierkegaard clearly identifies between matters that are properly political from those that are strictly 'non-political'. Included in the latter are concerns that are not purely temporal, such as the spiritual aspect of the self which is in turn related to questions regarding existential development. Kierkegaard argues that the political and the non-political are logically distinct concepts and hence are radically different in both the categories and the means that they respectively employ. As such, neither can nor ought to try to legislate the other. If the categories are mixed, e.g., if sensate power is exerted to cure a spiritual sickness, there is conceptual confusion which more often than not results in greater harm being done than good. In this case, for example, the spiritual problem remains uncured. In addition, the spiritual sickness is also falsely diagnosed as cured which only risks further spiritual impoverishment.

In-line with his theory of the political, Kierkegaard's unique solution to the malady of the mixing of the political and the non-political has, in all three cases, been authorial. Kierkegaard diagnoses the particularly troublesome categorical confusions of his times and highlights them in his authorship. In opposition to political reformation, Kierkegaard's authorship directs itself not to a populace but to a single individual (reader). Kierkegaard asks each individual reader to honestly admit that a spiritual problem is evident and that wilful, inward development is needed on their part in



order to alleviate the sickness. Kierkegaard then uses his authorship in various differing ways (e.g., as 'upbuilding' literature, as 'psychological investigation', etc.) to guide his reader back to existential security *via* emphasising the need for inward, spiritual deepening (in *addition* to catering for one's temporal wellbeing).

Following this note, Kierkegaard's authorship, at least up until *An Open Letter* of 1851, does not make proposals of external reform.<sup>71</sup> That is not to say that Kierkegaard is against political reform altogether. Kierkegaard is not critical of political reform that seeks to increase a citizenry's temporal wellbeing *per se*.<sup>72</sup> The attempt to cure non-political problems with political means is, however, considered to be an over-zealous and illegitimate application of the latter. Ironically enough, the best way for politics to aid a non-political problem might simply be to continue to regulate genuinely political issues – to not cause additional problems that are tied to the disastrous mixing of the political and the non-political.

As we saw above, Kierkegaard is not averse to politics *per se*. I hope to have shown that Kierkegaard would not condemn a political programme that both respected his theory of the political as well as brought about temporal benefits (decreasing unemployment, securing civil liberties, etc.) without disrupting non-political entities. Kierkegaard himself refrains from politics as much as he can and, as we saw in the previous chapter, this trait might have frustrated some of his readers. But Kierkegaard

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<sup>71</sup> Even though Kierkegaard's attack against the press (which is well-documented in the Princeton edition of Howard and Edna Hong's *The Corsair Affair*) could be seen as a religious call for reform, Kierkegaard does not explicitly call for changes in the regulation of the press. I shall argue below (chapter six) that Kierkegaard's polemical encounter with the press differs from his later call for reform (in the so-called 'attack literature') in that the latter does explicitly seek to make external changes.

<sup>72</sup> It should be noted, however, that Kierkegaard's prioritisation of existential concerns over civil liberties is in my opinion occasionally a cause for genuine concern. Kierkegaard has been criticised, for example, for his consistent prioritisation of what he deems to be the existential improvement of women over securing civil liberties for their political emancipation. On this subject, see notes 138 below, and 51 above.

abstains from providing positive political programmes for two chief reasons. The first reason is practical, whilst the second is theoretical and informs Kierkegaard's theory of the political.

The first, practical reason for Kierkegaard to refrain from providing a positive political programme is simply that he is not confident that he is adequately 'trained' for the task (TM, 60, cf., COR, 54). Hence, Kierkegaard spells out a theory of the political but leaves it to politicians to work out which policy changes are most beneficial to the temporal wellbeing of the majority of the citizenry. Kierkegaard's own talents lie in catering for the spiritual wellbeing of the single individual. Therefore, Kierkegaard's authorial task is directed towards helping the single individual develop existentially. This task is fully complimentary to a 'genuine' political order (i.e., one respecting his theory of the political); since the former caters for the spiritual (and infinite) aspect of the self and the latter cares for the temporal aspects of the self by promoting temporal wellbeing.

If a social-political situation is one where Kierkegaard's theory of the political is not respected, (or perhaps where individuals are failing in their existential task for other reasons) then Kierkegaard takes it upon himself to provide an additional authorial task; providing an 'existential-corrective' to the established order. This existential-corrective also seeks to aid the reader *qua* single individual back to existential development without resorting to external reform.

The second, more theoretical reason for Kierkegaard to abstain from policy-making is due to the fear of adding to the very problem he so expertly diagnoses in his

authorship. From Kierkegaard's works, it is clear that he often addresses his polemical thought to a perceived political over-zealousness with regards to non-political issues. As stated above, Kierkegaard was primarily interested in and skilled at spiritual edification. Given this, it could be easy for a reader to accidentally mix Kierkegaard's existential (non-political) commitments with any policy recommendations he might have provided. Such a confusion of two logically distinct parts of life would only risk counter-productively adding to the spiritual destitution that Kierkegaard was addressing with his authorship.

Despite the categorical difference between the two realms Kierkegaard had nevertheless explicitly stated that his ideal Christian is 'responsive' to external – and these could include political – changes. Kierkegaard's ideal individuals, similarly, are not political quietists, religious zealots, or asocial individualists. On the contrary, Kierkegaard's ideal individual cares for both the spiritual, existential betterment of their fellow neighbours, as well as for their temporal wellbeing (though I do think that the former *is* to be prioritised over the latter). Kierkegaard highlights this in his authorship by publishing works which are 'existential correctives' to perceived social problems. In a wider sense, Kierkegaard actively encourages people to take an interest in the spiritual development of their neighbours. (This point will be argued for in more detail in chapter seven below.)

Part of Kierkegaard's authorial project is therefore existential. Kierkegaard saw himself as providing existential aid in response to external (including political) changes. Some of Kierkegaard's thought is also political. Kierkegaard outlines a theory of the political which seeks to ensure that existentially harmful situations do

not come about in the first place. But Kierkegaard has a third element to his authorship, a social one. Kierkegaard's social contribution is in diagnosing what happens to social relations when the sanctity of the non-political is violated by illegitimate political action. Kierkegaard's authorship provides guidelines on how we might nevertheless help one another when 'ungenuine' politics is practised.

In sum, there are four key aspects of Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political that are constant throughout the authorship. We have already looked at the first three, and will examine the fourth below (in chapter six):

**Table of Key tenets of Kierkegaard's theory of the political:**

1. There is a distinction between entities that ought properly to be considered political, and between those that are non-political.
2. Political entities ought to cater for the temporal aspects of the citizenry, and ought to apply legitimately political means to do so (such as taxation, majority voting, etc.)
3. One aspect of the non-political – the spiritual and the existential – is a matter of individual conscience and inward development. Kierkegaard believes that it is justifiable for one individual to prompt another in the direction of spiritual development – but spiritual reform ought never to turn into a concern for political goods alone.
4. A final part of Kierkegaard's theory of the political (to be examined in chapter six below) is that individuals can call for the removal of external obstructions to the attempts of single individuals to bring about spiritual, existential development in their contemporaries. Such 'obstacles' might include policies that do not respect Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political. Kierkegaard's theory of the political therefore also provides the basis for existentially grounded political activism, and for a negative political program.

In response to Kierkegaard's basic theoretical position, one might argue that Kierkegaard sets up something of a false dichotomy. Clearly religious issues are, and indeed must be decided upon in a 'political' way on a daily basis. An example might be the following consideration: 'What aspects of religious education should be taught on the national school curriculum?' Given the fact that religious and political entities *do* often mingle, what might Kierkegaard have meant by claiming that the two are logically distinct categories – or was he simply incorrect?

In response to this claim, and to clarify Kierkegaard's position, I would argue that Kierkegaard would see the example of the school curriculum as a *political* matter. Despite the fact that the matter ostensibly appears to be concerned with religiosity, it actually relates to (or ought to at least) the well-being of the majority. In such an example, the members of the governing body or committee ought not to base their decision on an 'existential qualification' – on their respective views about what the existentially ideal way of life is, for example. Rather, the members ought to decide the matter politically by attempting to calculate which curriculum material would maximise the overall wellbeing for the affected people (school children, parents, teachers, and so forth). Questions of what the genuine or ideal form of existential life is must ultimately be left for each single individual to decide for his or herself. Any attempt to decide this question for them only risks tempting the single individual into outward conformity and hence away from genuine conviction.

In the chapters to come I will spell out the final caveat of Kierkegaard's theory of the political: i.e., why and how Kierkegaard comes to condone external political change given his hitherto only disparaging remarks about employing external reform to solve

an existential problem. I will highlight further the relation between existential impoverishment and 'ungenuine' politics that is addressed in various places throughout Kierkegaard's authorship. I will also endeavour to verify Kierkegaard's self-ascribed report that his authorship is an attempt at remedying politically caused existential impoverishment. The next three chapters will engage in these tasks by examining three more of Kierkegaard's principle works: *From the Papers*, *Two Ages* and *The Moment* (respectively). It will be seen that the key tenets of Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political can be traced in each of these works; which is to say, from Kierkegaard's earliest writings to his latest ones.

The following works will therefore take a much deeper investigation into the specifically existential aspect of Kierkegaard's theory of the political. We will see the existential effects of violating Kierkegaard's theory of the political; firstly with a case study of a 'single individual' (in *From the Papers*); then by a closer examination of the spiritual destitution illegitimate policies might have on an entire age (in *Two Ages*); and finally in a situation where spiritual impoverishment is so threatened by externalities that Kierkegaard calls for reform (in *The Moment*). The culmination of the ideas in the third work will also provide a textual justification for the forth aspect of Kierkegaard's theory of the political – its use in justifying negative political change.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### *From the Papers.*

#### Introduction.

Having outlined Kierkegaard's theory of the political this chapter seeks to show that Kierkegaard's theoretical understanding of the relation between existential and political issues existed throughout his authorship. Hence, the first text we will look at is one of Kierkegaard's earliest writings – *From the Papers* [of *One Still Living*].

An analysis of this text will show that some aspects of Kierkegaard's theory of the political, as elucidated in his later writings, were not fully thought out in this former text. Nevertheless, this early work shows the genesis of Kierkegaard's theory of the political. Despite the fact that some aspects might be re-worked, then, there is a large amount of consistency between *From the Papers* and Kierkegaard's later articulations of his theory of the political.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Other scholars that have seen *From the Papers* as a starting point for some of the central concepts that run throughout Kierkegaard's oeuvre include: Kirmmse (2006, 11); Malantschuk (1971, 182); Verstrynge (2006, 54, 55); and Westfall (2006, 47). Verstrynge connects this early work, in particular, with the political expressions of two other books: the *Book on Adler* and *Two Ages*. Whilst I will not look at the *Book on Adler* I will examine a similar practice to the phenomenon which interests Verstrynge, the present age's use and abuse of divine authority, in the sixth chapter, looking instead at





#### 4.1 The Review of *Only a Fiddler*.

##### Introduction.

In the previous chapter we identified a theory of the political in three bodies of Kierkegaard's works that largely span the period of 1846-1851. How, if at all, do these later works relate to Kierkegaard's earliest and pseudonymous writings? As of yet, it might be argued that Kierkegaard's theory of the political is more of an appendage to, rather than an integral aspect of the entire authorship. To argue that a political line of thought runs throughout Kierkegaard's entire authorship, therefore, it will be necessary to examine at least one of his early works. Before his dissertation proposal (*The Concept of Irony*) and five years before the publication of *Either/Or*, a book which Kierkegaard regarded as the true beginning of his authorship,<sup>74</sup> Kierkegaard had written a little article called *From the Papers of One Still Living* (in *Early Polemical Writings* [hereafter simply; EPW], pp. 53-102), intended for publication in a scholarly journal. The journal folded, however, and so Kierkegaard published his article as a self-standing book. I believe that a primitive form of Kierkegaard's theory of the political is already at work in this very early work.

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<sup>74</sup> See n.78 below.

#### 4.1.1 An analysis of *From the Papers*

In *From the Papers*, Kierkegaard develops his theory of aesthetics by reviewing a work by Hans Christian Andersen - poet, novelist and writer of children's fairy-tales.<sup>75</sup> This ostensibly literary examination nevertheless brings up many of Kierkegaard's most prominent philosophical themes, albeit in an embryonic form. An examination of these principles is a fruitful addition to an understanding of the theory of the political that has been examined thus far.

Despite this, the work presents many hermeneutical problems from the outset. *From the Papers* is not signed by 'S. Kierkegaard' as so many of the works in Kierkegaard's 'signed' authorship would come to be. *From the Papers* is signed by one 'S. Kjerkegaard'. What are we to make of this subtle variant? That it is just a mistake appears an untenable position since Kierkegaard's journal entries [of 1834] show evidence of him practising signing his name in this fashion (Cappelørn, Garff & Kondrup, 2003, 40, 50).

Scholars of the work have drawn differing conclusions from this peculiarity. Some go ahead and talk of the views expressed in the book as nevertheless belonging to those

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<sup>75</sup> Among the fairy-tales Andersen authored are: 'The Little Mermaid', 'The Ugly Duckling', 'The Emperor's New Clothes', 'The Princess and the Pea' and 'The Snow Queen'.

of S. Kierkegaard.<sup>76</sup> Others have designated the work as pseudonymous (e.g., Kirmmse, 1990b, 265-66).<sup>77</sup>

Interestingly enough, discussion as to how close the pseudonym's 'Kjerkegaard's' views are to 'Kierkegaard's' is lacking within the scholarship of this book. For other pseudonyms in Kierkegaard's authorship such discussions are commonplace. This is most likely because, with regards to the other pseudonyms, Kierkegaard elaborates on the differences between his position and theirs. In his later works, Kierkegaard has a clearer idea of the authorship as a whole. Thus, Kierkegaard later distinguishes where each pseudonym stands in relation to the views expressed in the entire authorship, and to which views Kierkegaard personally advocates. Kierkegaard later decides not to include these early works as part of his 'entire authorship'.<sup>78</sup> The failure to include them could be because the earlier works are test projects of concepts and techniques that Kierkegaard would employ once he had a definitive idea of the objective of his authorship. Julia Watkin, the translator of Kierkegaard's *Early Polemical Writings*, takes this stance. Watkin believes that Kierkegaard could be described as

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<sup>76</sup> Whether intentionally or not is sometimes uncertain. Garff, for example, does not mention this variation in his studies on the work and so whether he believes the views expressed in the work to be Kierkegaard's *despite* the publisher 'Kjerkegaard', or in light of it, is just not stated (in; Garff, 2007).

<sup>77</sup> Although Kirmmse appears to have revised his view, for in an earlier work he spoke of the views of *From the Papers* as belonging to 'SK' – a term he uses throughout his work to refer to Søren Kierkegaard (Kirmmse, 1990b, 261). Malantschuk takes a rather unique intermediary position between 'pseudonymous' and 'self-authored'. For Malantschuk says that *From the Papers* is edited by Kierkegaard, but that the views expressed are that of another 'I' (Malantschuk, 1971, 187). Perhaps this is akin to how Kierkegaard later publishes *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* with himself as editor but Johannes Climacus as the author of the main body of text? For my own part, I find the debate about whether the editor, 'Kjerkegaard' is an alternative spelling of 'Kierkegaard' or a pseudonym to be rendered irrelevant by the fact that the main body of the text is delegated by this 'Kjerkegaard' to another, anonymous author anyway. Thus 'Kjerkegaard' or 'Kierkegaard' – neither accept authorial responsibility for the views we shall be assessing, and so the work may as well be treated, for all intensive purposes, as though it were pseudonymous.

<sup>78</sup> See for example: JP VI, 6770, 6238; CUP, 625-30; TPV, 5-6; *Without Authority*, 165.

‘experimenting’ with literary devices, such as pseudonymity, that will come to play a central role in his authorship (Watkin, 1990, vii).<sup>79</sup>

If Watkin is correct, then perhaps Kierkegaard was also using his earlier works to experiment with *concepts* that would likewise come to form an invaluable part of his authorship. I shall also argue for this thesis, focusing first on Kierkegaard's review of Andersen's *Only a Fiddler*. For now, however, the discussion of pseudonymity quickly complicates issues once again. For the preface of the book explains that whilst that small part, at least, is written by ‘S. Kjerkegaard’, the remainder of the book was written by some other anonymous author<sup>80</sup> and was even ‘published against his will’ by this ‘S. Kjerkegaard’. If Kierkegaard was indeed experimenting in the art of bemusing his readers, he was off to a good start.

That the preface of the book begins with a surreal account of the origins of the book could give us further grounds for treating it as if it were pseudonymous. Rather than simply communicating directly what Kierkegaard wishes to tell us, an elaborate scene is instead portrayed. The surreal, literary account of the origin of the work, as well as the use of a pseudonymous editor, is typical of Kierkegaard's later, recognised aesthetic writings.<sup>81</sup> If he was only going to expound upon his own views, Kierkegaard could presumably have begun his communication as directly as he does in his other signed works. Since he is delineating the ideas of another person instead,

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<sup>79</sup> Westfall also defends this view (2006, 47), albeit more tentatively than Watkin does. David Cain has argued that some of the themes of Kierkegaard's ‘official’ authorship were already evidently being worked through in his earlier works (Cain, 1999, 131, *passim*).

<sup>80</sup> For the sake of simplicity I shall refer to this ‘person’ as ‘the reviewer’, rather than by a more informative but cumbersome term.

<sup>81</sup> For other surreal and gratuitously fictive accounts of the origin of some pseudonymous work, see for example: E/O, 3-15; and *Stages on Life's Way*, 3-6, & 187-91.

Kierkegaard ensures that the pseudonymous views are not mistaken for his own by establishing an elaborate, fictional scenario.

To add to the peculiarity of the work, just as the preface to the book ends (and with it, the writings of 'S. Kjerkegaard') the reviewer begins their discussion examining the use of a preface. At heart, the essay starts out by addressing a Hegelian-inspired motif - that of preventing philosophy from starting from an arbitrary or contingent point with an 'attempt to begin with nothing' (EPW, 61).<sup>82</sup> This debate was one of the main focal points of Hegel-influenced thought in Denmark at that time, and was initiated and perpetuated by Johan Ludvig Heiberg's [1791 – 1860] ongoing attempt at popularising Hegel-influenced philosophy.<sup>83</sup> That Kierkegaard's reviewer starts the work by joining in on the debate could be seen as an attempt to appear schooled in the area, as well as a possible attempt at siding with Heiberg's philosophy.

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<sup>82</sup> Presumably a reference to Hegel's *Science of Logic* (Hegel, 2004, 70, for example). It might be worth noting that Niels Thulstrup believes that Kierkegaard is in fact criticising Hegel here. Furthermore, Thulstrup argues that Kierkegaard's understanding of Hegel on this point is 'simply incorrect' (Thulstrup, 1980, 168). In the introduction of the *Science of Logic* Hegel does state that logic starts with nothing. But Hegel also argues that logic starts with 'pure being', 'pure being' and 'nothing' being interchangeable in this way. If Kierkegaard is indeed criticising Hegel(ianism) for beginning with 'nothing', meaning nothing at all (not even pure being) then Kierkegaard's criticism would be based on a misreading. But I do not think Kierkegaard is criticising the Hegelian attempt at beginning with nothing here. Nor do I think Kierkegaard particularly cares if logic attempts to start without presuppositions. From an analysis of Kierkegaard's comments towards 'beginning with nothing', however, it becomes clear that Kierkegaard is only troubled when existential problems are attempted to be solved with a presuppositionless beginning – i.e., by an objective system of philosophy that fails to take the individual's subjective and existential situation into account first. See for example: CA, 81; CUP, 111, 113; WOL, 218; JP III, 3281, 3299; cf. *ibid.*, 2910.

<sup>83</sup> Heiberg had, in fact, published the first ever full commentary on Hegel's *Logic* in either German or Danish with his 1832 text: *Outline of the Philosophy of Philosophy or Speculative Logic* (Stewart, 2007a, 388). In Stewart's thorough analysis, he concludes that this same work is 'the most significant work in the Danish Hegel reception up until this point' (*ibid.*, 373). Heiberg would have fronted the intended third issue of *Perseus*, the issue Kierkegaard was here attempting to be published in, with an article defending his position that philosophy begins with pure being (Stewart, 2007b, 272-273).

The reviewer shows admiration for 'the most respectable' form of beginning with nothing - Hegel's original 'great attempt' (*ibid.*, 61).<sup>84</sup> Hegel's form of attempting to begin with nothing, within the context of his work on logic, is considered philosophically justifiable since the attempt is 'only a movement with the [logical] system's own limits' (*ibid.*). In other words, Hegel is presumably delineating a set of logical relations between entities which may or may not exist. Hegel is involved in a kind of ontology – and 'beginning with nothing', in such a case, is perfectly acceptable. What the reviewer finds problematic, however, is that this Hegel-influenced methodology had been misapplied by some Danes to other matters, namely those which are said to involve existence. 'Beginning with nothing' within a philosophical system is acceptable. The idea that existence itself does or can 'begin with nothing' is both philosophically unjustifiable as well as existentially harmful though.

The reviewer thinks that there are two chief problems with this misapplication of Hegel's logical claim. The first is that the reviewer fears that Denmark's leading intellectual figures were illegitimately applying this logical claim to historical development. As such, Kierkegaard's peers developed an inclination to neglect the fact that their age was the result of a long and arduous historical development. A second, related problem with this is that Kierkegaard's age subsequently developed 'a great tendency, on the one hand, to convince itself of its activity and significance and, on the other... [to make] itself the true starting point of world history' (*ibid.*).

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<sup>84</sup> Hegel's *Logic* is also directly cited on the subsequent page in a footnote. Once more it is praised, this time as a 'master's immortal work'.

The reviewer continues to argue that this second problem is itself dangerous for two additional reasons. Firstly, the reviewer claims that an existential rupture occurs when an individual holds a political ideal that is radically at odds with actuality. This leads to the second problem: that the individual responds to the schism between the political ideal and historical actuality by closing him or herself up within his or herself. This response to an existential rupture (which we might briefly note was caused by a misapplication of two logically distinct spheres: logic as a system of thought, and actuality) is existential impoverishment; since the self-enclosed individual will become unable to properly relate both to the world, as well as to other people.<sup>85</sup>

Despite the initial praise that the reviewer gives to Hegel then, they worry about a misapplication of Hegel's logic and/or his theory of world history. The reviewer worries that his or her contemporaries were practising a Hegelian-inspired theory of world history which has negative effects when it is applied to concrete times and places (despite the fact that as a speculative theory about historical progression it might be philosophically sound). With the publication of Heiberg's *The Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age* [published in 1833] many of Kierkegaard's contemporaries believed that the age was in a stage of fermentation but that a more glorious age was sure to come.<sup>86</sup> This was coupled with the idea that the previous ages were either ignored, or else seen as an embarrassing but necessary step in historical progression (*ibid.*, 61).

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<sup>85</sup> We will examine Kierkegaard's views about authentically relating to others below, in section 7.3 and 7.4 below.

<sup>86</sup> One contemporary for example, Carl Weis, openly attested to the fact that the age was in a 'crisis' (Stewart, 2007b, 262). Another, Eggert Christopher Tryde, thought that the age was also in a crisis but that only religion, not philosophy, could cure this problem (Stewart, 2007a, 437). Finally, Frederik Sibbern also openly admitted that the age was bordering on a crisis, but differed from both Heiberg and Weis in his belief that it was the application of Hegelian-inspired thought that was nourishing (rather than curing) the problems of the age (Stewart, 2007b, 206).



This mentality is completely at odds with the reviewer's. More cynical about the age and where it was going, the reviewer agrees that the Danish state was undergoing "a period of fermentation [*Gjærings-Periode*]", but emphasises that this implies that it is "not a period of action [*Gjerings-Periode*]" (*ibid.*, 71). Furthermore, the reviewer argues that even if the age *wasn't* stuck in this inactive, fermenting period, a Hegelian-inspired optimism that the age will necessarily develop in a positive way is still not necessarily justified. In fact, the reviewer appears to hold the opposite view.<sup>87</sup> The reviewer admits that whilst other historical periods of transition did lead to ages that were as concrete and long-lasting as the formation of granite, the modern period is best described as 'deeply absorbed in the formation of peat' (*ibid.*, 72). That is, even if we *were* to escape this transitory limbo, the state of affairs that we are currently heading towards is less desirable than that of previous ages.

Another, far more devastating consequence of this problem is that the political misapplication of this Hegel-influenced logic causes serious existential harm. The reviewer argues that the notion that one can 'begin from nothing' seriously neglects the fact that the political sphere must first take the "condition[s] of life" as their starting point (*ibid.*, 65). The reviewer claims that their fellow contemporaries and politicians believe in an unduly idealistic picture of the future state of the country. This idealised, philosophical view of the state of the future will only create problems when it encounters actual political conditions.

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<sup>87</sup> In holding a reserved criticism of the future state of the age, the reviewer appears to be in line with the view Heiberg expressed in his *The Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age*. Holding a cynical attitude towards the age's development seems to be the two's only major similarity, however. For in Heiberg's work, he warned that the future state of the age would be corrupt if it failed to embrace a Hegel-influenced philosophy and if it abandoned the idea that certain members of the populace ought to be maintained as representatives of culture. The views of the reviewer are in no clear sense similar in this regard.

Apart from the indirect consequences a political neglect of actual conditions is likely to have on the average person, the dissonance caused between the philosophical ideal and actuality will negatively affect the individual – especially, the reviewer warns us, the individual of the ‘younger’ generation. The individuals of the ‘younger’ generation had received an education that was highly influenced by a combination of a ‘Golden Age’ understanding of romanticism, Hegel-influenced philosophy, and ethico-religious beliefs. The reviewer argues that these teachings, by and large, only re-instate an undue optimism in both the logical necessity of political progress as well as the idea that non-political problems could eventually be solved with political means.

Faced with such a marked rupture between an idealistic view of the world and actuality, the reviewer notes that the individual would have to make an existential choice: either give up the idealistic philosophical conclusions and adapt oneself to the real, experienced conditions of actual life; or else hold on to an unjustified philosophical idealism and live a life that fails to reconcile existence with actuality. The latter kind of attitude entails an existentially inauthentic life,<sup>88</sup> but the reviewer claims that the idealistic philosophies that the younger generation were educated in and became infatuated with most likely means that they will not give up their philosophical optimism. That is to say that the majority of the younger generation suffer existentially. Hans Christian Andersen is an archetype of the younger generation who the reviewer studies in depth.

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<sup>88</sup> A very similar criticism against some versions of the romantic way of life is pursued three years later in Kierkegaard's doctoral dissertation *The Concept of Irony* and similar criticisms of both living an ‘aesthetic’ way of life and a philosophically idealised one are pursued in subsequent works throughout the authorship. Unfortunately we cannot hope to faithfully highlight the similarities and differences between these positions here though.

Andersen is described as “a possibility of a personality wrapped up in such a web of arbitrary moods and moving through an elegiac duodecimo-scale of almost echoless, dying tones just as easily roused as subdued, who, in order to become a personality, needs a strong life-development” (*ibid.*, 70). This life-development, however, is to be won by honestly confronting the reality of one's situation and given age: one's given reality. A ‘battle-won confidence in the world’ (*ibid.*, 65), which typifies those who have undergone this life-development, suggests that one must face the fact that the world, and one's desires, conflict. Rather than shirk away from the unwanted aspects of the world, however, one must learn to grow despite them and even to transubstantiate them into the poetically beautiful.<sup>89</sup>

This tendency to lose oneself in ideality is summed up as a typical attitude of the ‘younger generation’. The older generation, by contrast, is marked by an honest combat with actuality. Part of what makes the older generation so able to face up to the problems of actuality is simply that they *had* to. Lacking any pre-established, popularised life-view, or idealistic philosophy, the older generation were forced to develop their own, to think and act for themselves. An author from this period with whom the reviewer contrasts Andersen is Thomasine Gyllembourg, whose novels describe a previous age where people more readily became eminent people. By strength of character and conviction an eminent person could formulate a life-view that was truly their own. Despite the fact that Thomasine Gyllembourg wrote her novels anonymously our anonymous reviewer regards the author of those novels as an

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<sup>89</sup> One's ability to develop in spite of external circumstances is what also informs Kierkegaard's view of ‘genius’ (which, as we will see, remains consistently throughout his authorship). In an early journal entry [1839] Kierkegaard curtly writes that: ‘Genius, like a thunderstorm, goes against the wind’ (JP II; 1290). Near the end of his life, Kierkegaard once more gives a description of genius that is almost identical to his earlier view: ‘Geniuses are like a thunderstorm [*Tordenveir*]: they go against the wind [...]’ (written in his journal in 1849 [JP II; 1298], but published in the 6<sup>th</sup> installment of *The Moment* in 1855 (TM; 204)).

exemplar, a person who can show us how to survive the “student graduate prose” (*ibid.*, 67) of modern politics.

It is important here to spell out what a life-view is and why the reviewer thinks that Andersen lacks one. This crucial concept – a concept that will run through Kierkegaard's entire authorship – is given a lengthy and informative definition by our reviewer. Accordingly, a life-view is:

‘...more than a quintessence or a sum of propositions maintained in its abstract neutrality; it is more than experience, which as such is always fragmentary. It is, namely, the transubstantiation of experience; it is the unshakeable certainty in oneself won from all experience’ (*ibid.*, 76).

This concept is then further clarified. For though it is admitted that Andersen has in fact an unshakeable principle around which all other experiences in life gravitate, this centre is an inadequate one for a life-view. Andersen suffers from the fact that the central concern of his life is his “merely phenomenological personality” (*ibid.*, 82); and this in turn contains an ‘untruth’ (*ibid.*, 80).<sup>90</sup>

The reviewer continues to explain that the existential problems Andersen encounters can be resolved by addressing one of two possible problems. The origin of Andersen's existential disunity is either caused by a “misrelation to himself” which is willingly perpetuated by the individual, despite the fact that they are provided with all of the details of their situation; or by the individual simply not having the necessary “fund of

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<sup>90</sup> It may be worth mentioning the similarity between the aesthete ‘A’ of *Either/Or*, who is described by Judge William, in similar terms as Andersen is by the reviewer, as having not a life-view but something which resembles one (E/O II, 202). It might also be worth noting that George Pattison explicitly connects Andersen with the aesthetic way of life (Pattison, 1992, 132).

knowledge” to recognise and overcome this misrelation (*ibid.*, 89). In a certain sense, the first problem is linked to the second: for one cannot *really* choose to remain in their position of existential impoverishment if they are not fully informed that they are in that situation. Andersen's existential impoverishment, the review claims, is largely (if not wholly) caused by the latter problem.

However, the cause of this existential disunity is a *political* one. In a telling passage, the reviewer explains how the age Andersen found himself in was in part responsible for Andersen's existential dilemma. Andersen could have developed into an existentially sound individual, we are told:

if the age, through a colossal union of a large number of forces, each significant in itself, amid the motley profusion of these had pointed absolutely undeviatingly to a single goal and had worked with such energy toward it that such a striving must grip him [Andersen] for some time and yield the life-supplement necessary for him. Such a favour from the circumstances of time, however, did not fall to Andersen's lot, because his life development proper falls in the so called political period... [and we can] certainly be convinced as to how little this period can fortify such a temperament [as Andersen's] (*ibid.*, 71).

While it is not claimed here that the 'political period' is *wholly* responsible for any existential failure on Andersen's part, it is at least clear that the political situation Andersen found himself in is in part to blame for its (purposeful or not) encouragement of an impoverished way of life. Here, the socio-political establishments inadvertently thwart the individual's pursuit of the good life by taxing some ways of life whilst subsidising others. That the ways of life that are subsidised happen to be rather impoverished ways of living only makes the situation worse.

I shall argue that in works nearer to the end of his authorship Kierkegaard adopts an even stronger position than this. In the later political works, Kierkegaard implies that some ways of living are rendered completely ineffectual by various socio-political factors (assessed in chapter five below). In this work, the reviewer is at least clear in the assertion that the age is partly to blame for the damaging effect it has on individuals' existential development. That the reviewer believes the age to be imperfect is clear from the description of it as a 'lukewarm time' (*ibid.*, 82) in which 'every day we encounter the most ridiculous combinations of individuals shaken together like bits of glass in a kaleidoscope' (*ibid.*, 72).

With regards to individuals like Andersen, the reviewer makes it clear that the socio-political environment actively helps to hinder their existential development. A hypothetical character quite like Andersen is said to have been 'tossed about by [this] intensely agitated age' (*ibid.*, 80); and elsewhere it is asserted that though Andersen suffers from an unhealthy infatuation with his own internality, and that the age only adds to the problem: 'If he [Andersen] was wrapped up in himself he was also thrown back into himself' (*ibid.*, 73).

Living in a deplorable state of affairs does not, of course, necessarily entail that one will be existentially crippled. An existential problem is caused by a failure to unite the 'internal' and the 'external' and is therefore always partly the fault of the individual too.<sup>91</sup> But when an age does little to fortify anything but an aesthetic temperament and when it actively 'throws' individuals back into that aesthetic way of living it certainly

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<sup>91</sup> As we shall see in chapters five and six below, Kierkegaard gives a closer examination to the individual's relationship between 'external' social and political forces than this early and somewhat undeveloped understanding.

hinders one's existential development. When the 'external' one relates to subsidises this existentially impoverished way of living and hinders one's ability to authentically relate to others it is clear that these external, socio-political factors are partly contributing towards existential impoverishment. Despite all of the flaws that Andersen exhibits, the reviewer claims that the times that Andersen lived in are even worse: "Andersen's lyric self-absorption [*Selvfortabelse*] is both more interesting and more gratifying than the modern political-epic self-admiration [*Selvforagabelse*]" (*ibid.*, 70-71).

This reading has the interesting result of questioning the preconception of Kierkegaard as a mere subjectivist, wholly uninterested in external goings on. As we can already see from this early work, Kierkegaard's interest with authentic existential relations necessarily involves an analysis of the external situation that an individual relates to and which frames (or even hinders) one's pursuit of existential development. *Any* engagement in becoming an existentially authentic individual would require analysing and taking into consideration one's socio-political environment.

*From the Papers* has another important side-effect. Kierkegaard would later argue for the removal of an external obstacle that he perceived as hindering the ability to develop existentially. In this early work, Kierkegaard/the reviewer acknowledges the fact that Andersen is in part at fault for his own existential failings. If, or when, the socio-political situation changes into one where the onus of existential impoverishment falls almost entirely on external, socio-political obstructions, we see that both Kierkegaard's view of political activism as well as of his authorial task also change in response (see chapters five and six below). Thus, in later writings

Kierkegaard argues for the abolition of the Danish State-Church marriage on grounds that it fosters inauthentic ways of being and creates impoverished individuals much like Andersen (6.2). I would argue that Kierkegaard's authorship is evidently reflexive towards external changes, and that this can even be seen in the earliest of his works.

It has struck many Kierkegaard scholars as a peculiarity that Andersen in particular was singled out for attack. Many have also offered plausible justifications, and some of these justifications have been pragmatic by nature. That is, scholars have claimed that Kierkegaard attacked Andersen specifically because of some practical benefit for doing so. Without entering into whether or not such claims are fair, however, it is important to ask why, *philosophically* speaking, 'the reviewer' might make a case study of Andersen in particular.

Andersen's situation is said to be only a typical example of a particular phenomenon: a person that becomes existentially impoverished at least in part because of a specific socio-political background. Hence, examining what facts might be peculiar to Andersen (as opposed to existentially healthy individuals), as well as what part political entities might have played in affecting Andersen's character will help us understand the relationship between the political and the existential a little more. This will be the focus of the next section.



## 4.2 Why did 'the reviewer' attack Andersen?

The anonymous reviewer had argued that from Andersen's literary work we can deduce that the latter has skipped over his 'epic' stage of development. At first the cryptic statement of Andersen lacking an 'epic' stage of development might appear to be a purely aesthetic criticism of Andersen's work. This is because Johannes Heiberg, one of Denmark's leading philosophers and aestheticians (and, incidentally, founder and editor of the journal in which Kierkegaard originally intended to publish *From the Papers*) had popularised a variant of Hegel's theory of poetry that employed the concept of an 'epic' stage.

Hegel had thought that romantic poetry could be split into three sub-genres: the epic, the lyric and the dramatic.<sup>92</sup> Heiberg, however, reversed the first two elements and so chose a 'lyric, epic, dramatic' development (Stewart, 2007b, 292-93).<sup>93</sup> In one of his journal articles, Kierkegaard questions the variation that Heiberg makes (JP I, 126) before tentatively deciding to adopt Heiberg's distinction. In another journal entry Kierkegaard accepts that Heiberg's alteration is fitting for the present time and place,

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<sup>92</sup> Hegel's division of poetry is quite often discussed in the Kierkegaard literature (i.e., Walsh, 2009, 33; Stewart, 2007b, 292) but rarely are the precise reference for this taxonomy given. It is found in the second volume of Hegel's magisterial 'Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts', in the third chapter which deals with 'poetry' alone, and in 'Section C' which deals with the 'genres of poetry'. There, Hegel discusses these three genres of poetry: the 'Epic' (A), the 'Lyric' (B), and the 'Dramatic' (C) (pp. 1040-1110, 1111-1157, and 1158-1238 respectively). It should be noted, however, that Hegel limits this taxonomy to poetry alone, and uses different methodologies in analysing poetry, including a merely descriptive, historical analysis. Heiberg's own use of the criteria that Hegel had developed for poetry only, is often far more different than Hegel's original. For example, Heiberg applies the theory that Hegel had originally only intended for romantic poetry: 'independently [i.e., to other areas of aesthetics] to material that is of great personal interest to him' (Stewart, 2007b, 294).

<sup>93</sup> See also: Fenger (1971, 136); Pattison (1983, 26); Thulstrup (1980, 173); and Westfall (2007, 36, n.8)).

but not (as Heiberg appears to want) when generalised to include all times and places (JP II, 1565).<sup>94</sup>

Since Kierkegaard evidently understood Heiberg's theory of aesthetics, and since Andersen is accused of missing his 'epic' stage of development, we could assume that 'the reviewer' is making an aesthetic criticism of Andersen's work. Further analysis reveals, however, that the reviewer is in fact also criticising Andersen's personality. What might the reviewer mean by stating that Andersen as a *person* lacked the 'epic stage of development'? The first hint is given when the reviewer addresses the prerequisites for the 'epic stage'. It is said that achieving the epic stage requires:

...a deep and earnest embracing of a given actuality, no matter how one loses oneself in it, as a life-strengthening rest in it and admiration of it, without the necessity of it ever coming to expression as such, but which can never have anything but the highest importance for the individual, even though it all went so unnoticed that the mood itself seemed born in secrecy and buried in silence. (EPW, 71)

This 'embracing' of actuality could have come, for Andersen at least, in one of two ways. Either Andersen could have submitted himself to a period of Pythagorean silence, or the age itself could have moved 'undeviatingly to a single goal' (*ibid.*). With regards to the option of 'Pythagorean silence', the reviewer lets slip that this option is not really tenable for Andersen, for to undertake such a study 'would be rather unlike him [Andersen]' (*ibid.*). It seems, then, that Andersen required the age to

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<sup>94</sup> Here Kierkegaard actually appears to be closer to Hegel's original intention, as Hegel only wanted to offer a description of some previous periods in the history of aesthetics, not all of which follow the same triadic pattern. See also Malantschuk, who argues that Kierkegaard's view of the lyrical, epic, and dramatic, not only includes an understanding of their 'respective levels', but also that each one '[...] corresponds to the three transactional functions, feeling, cognition, and will' respectively (Malantschuk, 1971, 183).

have been organised differently; to have been unified by an underlying idea or moving towards some goal. We will return to this point shortly. For now we will pursue the thought that the reviewer had some notion of Andersen's real life person. After all, the reviewer had charged Andersen of being not really the type of person that would undertake inward deepening.

This reference to Andersen's real life person is peculiar, but not infrequent. Indeed, as soon as the reviewer has stated that Andersen lacks the 'epic stage' of development (whether *qua* author or *qua* person was still ambiguous at that stage), the reviewer continues to tell us that 'later considerations will substantiate [this theorem] still more' (*ibid.*, 70). The nature of these 'later considerations', we come to find, are details about Andersen's real world person.

The fact that the reviewer appeals to personal details of Andersen's character is especially peculiar because a large part of the critique of Andersen is that the latter does not sufficiently detach himself from his literature. The reviewer complains that numerous instances in Andersen's fiction are turned into occasions for Andersen to insert his own ideas and opinions into the otherwise fictive world of the work. This is the main justification for the reviewer's critique of Andersen's work and personality.

If we are to maintain that the anonymous 'reviewer' is simply a fictive creation of Kierkegaard's, a *sui generis* persona which does not exist in reality, it appears as if details about the life of real world Danish 'contemporaries' should be out of place. In what sense is the fictive persona *contemporary* with any actual person? If it makes no sense to think that the persona could have gathered details about Andersen's private

life then we can only conclude one thing: Kierkegaard himself has inserted these details into the text and the reviewer is only being employed as a fictive mouthpiece for him. But this is precisely the charge that the anonymous reviewer levels against Andersen.

This means that the charge made against Andersen by the pseudonymous reviewer is internally contradictory. The assertion that Andersen fails aesthetically because he fails to detach himself from his fictive works is only viable if the 'author' of *From the Papers* knows details about Andersen – not some fictive variant, but the historically real person. The only way these details can be known is by Kierkegaard. Thus, when Kierkegaard makes this charge against Andersen he falls prey to the same criticism. This contradiction has not gone unnoticed within Kierkegaard scholarship. Some have concluded that Kierkegaard simply makes a logical error.<sup>95</sup> More sympathetic scholars believe that Kierkegaard's argument here is an early example of the kind of irony that would mark his authorship.<sup>96</sup> Further analysis of both the claims made about Andersen's person, and why these may be damaging to Andersen's authorship, may help to solve whether the inconsistency at the heart of *From the Papers* is intentional or not.

Firstly then, what are the kinds of things said of Andersen as a person? Andersen is said to lack in genius. Perhaps this can be concluded from a reading of Andersen's works. But the reviewer goes on to accuse Andersen of lacking the offense of

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<sup>95</sup> Westfall, for example, champions this view. He claims that the argument is 'untenable' (2007, 42), and that "The author contradicts himself throughout the review, moving back and forth between statements that read like arguments *ad hominem* and disclaimers that 'nevertheless remind readers that we are dealing with Andersen as a novelist'" (2007, 45. See also: Westfall, 2006, 39).

<sup>96</sup> Despite acknowledging the inconsistency in the reviewers criticism of Andersen, Joakim Garff believes that Kierkegaard has made this inconsistency on purpose, in a reciprocal admission that he too lacks a life-view (Garff, 2006, 94; see also: Kirmmse, 2006, 8, 14, 19).

Christianity (*ibid.*, 73). Later, we are told that Andersen is prone to a 'temptation to produce instead of developing himself' (*ibid.*, 74) and is said to be discontented 'with the actual world' (*ibid.*, 75). It is far harder to see how these personality traits could be determined from Andersen's texts alone: especially given the fact that an author may purposely write in a way that suggests that they, *qua* real world person, have these specific characteristics even though they may not.

If we accept what is said about Andersen as true, this would help us understand why Andersen may be so prone to be a victim of the age. If these are indeed some of Andersen's personality traits then it is not so much the fault of the age that Andersen is existentially impoverished but at least partly Andersen's fault as well. Neither Andersen's character traits nor the trends of his age are ideal prerequisites for existential development. Nevertheless, neither one is wholly to blame for Andersen's failure to develop existentially.

Andersen's 'weakly developed temperament' (*ibid.*, 74) is not given the requisite fortification from the age (*ibid.*, 71). Indeed, the political period necessarily affects Andersen 'only discouragingly' (*ibid.*, 73). But if we are told of how the age affects Andersen negatively, this talk is mirrored by statements about how Andersen relates to the dominating philosophy and literature of that age. In the discussions of Andersen's relations to these institutions, as well as elsewhere, claims are made which seem to appeal to the 'factually actual'<sup>97</sup> Andersen.

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<sup>97</sup> Westfall's (2007) term.

At the closing of these observations, however, the reviewer once more notes that they are "...supplementary proof of our statement, a statement as much about Andersen's misrelation to an epic development as about his indeclinability in life" (*ibid.*, 76). A little later on in the same page these observations are given even more credit:

When we now say that Andersen totally lacks a life-view, this statement is as much substantiated by the preceding [talk of Andersen's literature] as this latter [talk of Andersen's character] is substantiated by the statement itself verified in its truth. (*ibid.*, 76)

According to this statement, then, knowledge of Andersen's character alone would appear to yield sufficient evidence of whether Andersen has, or lacks, a life-view; and this in turn would decide whether his literature does or does not too. Thus, knowledge of Andersen's character could just as equally tell us whether his literature will be confined to the 'lyrical stage' or not.

The reviewer is at least aware of the possible contradiction inherent in both criticising Andersen for inserting himself illegitimately into his fiction, and making claims about Andersen's 'factually actual' person though. Just after the claim is made that Andersen's person could alone yield sufficient evidence of a lack of a life-view, the reviewer reminds us that 'we are dealing with Andersen only as a novelist' (*ibid.*, 77). A little later this is expanded upon. The reviewer, in fact, thinks it would be 'only a misunderstanding and misinterpretation', if we were to think that they had 'overstepped the limit of [their] esthetic jurisdiction' by mentioning Andersen's

person on so many occasions (*ibid.*, 83). The reviewer assures us that he or she 'does not know Andersen personally'.<sup>98</sup>

According to the reviewer, it is easy to learn about Andersen's personality from his authorship, since Andersen has been unable to detach himself entirely from his literature. But the reviewer also thinks that this very practice aesthetically damages his literature. Examples of aesthetic limitations caused by Andersen's entwinement with his works include the following. Firstly, Andersen cannot adequately express the viewpoints of characters which are radically different from his own. When Andersen describes children, for example, he is so unable to sufficiently detach himself from his own mentality that he either plants adult thoughts into the mind of a character supposed to be a child (albeit, childishly so), or he refers back to the fragmentary memories of his own childhood experiences (*ibid.*, 86). In either case, the reviewer concludes that the first six chapters of *Only a Fiddler* which are dedicated to Christian's childhood experiences are portrayed in an unconvincing and fragmented manner.

Other problems occur when Andersen illegitimately implants his own opinions into the novel. Andersen mixes up the views of the central protagonist 'Christian' with his own. An example is given when, in the novel, two women look at Christian with 'foolish eyes' as he is walking away. Presumably Christian does not see this himself. Additionally, the only reason the women's look is deemed to be foolish is because they are doubtful of whether Christian is truly a genius or not (another fact of which Christian himself presumably could not be aware). The women's looks are therefore

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<sup>98</sup> All though this claim, given the fictive nature of the reviewer, could also be ironically true.

considered 'foolish' by the novel's narrator. But the reviewer sees no reason for Andersen's fictive narrator to have drawn this conclusion. The judgement upon the women must have come from Andersen's own view. Thus, the reviewer sees the incident as an example of Andersen's inadvertent but meddlesome interception with the fictive flow of the novel - an interference that not only says something of the author but also has aesthetically displeasing consequences.

This links in with another charge made against Andersen. Rather than using his literary skill to persuade the reader that Christian should be considered a genius, Andersen's own opinion is just illegitimately forced into the novel, such as when the women's scepticism of Christian's gifts were judged by the narrator as 'foolish'.<sup>99</sup> Andersen's presupposition of Christian's genius enters the novel from outside of the fictive flow and before the reader has been given any evidence of Christian's genius. In fact, no evidence is ever given. In this way Andersen 'begs the question' with regards to his theory of genius. As the novel concludes, the only way the reader can accept the claim that Christian was indeed a genius all along, is if he or she already had accepted Andersen's unjustified judgement of Christian's talents in the first place.

Apart from irregular observations, Andersen is also accused of going into long-winded ramblings about matters which are of no immediate relevance to the fictive flow (*ibid.*, 94). These extra-fictive disputes involve matters to do with the *actual* world and so can only be attributed to the factually actual author. Andersen fails to

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<sup>99</sup> It could be argued that throughout Kierkegaard's authorship he attempts at all costs to avoid just this kind of abuse of authorial 'authority'. Kierkegaard frequently attempts to bring the reader towards a decision, whereby they must then make their own choice with regards to an existential decision. Roger Poole, for example, defends this view of the authorship (Poole, 1993). If this interpretation is correct, then Kierkegaard's attempts at avoiding having his readers accept his own viewpoint rather than develop theirs would be in direct conflict with what he thinks Andersen is doing.



poetically pick out what information would be relevant within the fiction and what would not (*ibid.*, 92). Finally, Andersen's aforementioned discontentment with the 'actual world' (*ibid.*, 75) permeates the views of each character he introduces (*ibid.*, 90) despite the fact that Andersen attempts to portray some characters as optimistic (occasionally even directly telling us that the character is so).

An author who had attained the epic stage, such as Thomasine Gyllembourg on the other hand, would write with an internal consistency around which all other elements of the work would gravitate. This centre would even allow the author to relate real world observations to the stable, fictive plot. Only once an author has learned to be able to separate themselves fully from their work can they then successfully transubstantiate real-world observations into the fictive world and ensure that the remarks are completely coherent with the underlying fictive theme. Andersen not only lacks the ability to bring his work into unity but also fails to adequately separate the extraneous from the fictive.

The reviewer argues that one need not necessarily know anything of Andersen's "factually actual" person before reading *Only a Fiddler* to nevertheless be able to make judgements of Andersen as a person. One could, presumably, amalgamate all of the remarks that seem to be extraneous to the fictive story-line and, realising that these remarks in and of themselves have an internal unity, attribute them to an additional entity. This additional character is more than just a narrator with a personality of its own (such as we may find in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example) - for this narrator not only frequently appeals to facts outside of the fictive world, but

also positively interferes with the fictive world, directly inserting its own beliefs into the character's mouths and thwarting their own fictive development.

One of the claims the reviewer makes therefore appears to be just this: that Andersen inserts himself into his literature to such an extent that one can adequately draw many conclusions about his real person on the basis of these unintentional interventions. We can, for example, draw inferences of the kinds of things which Andersen is interested in by recognising his frequent, extra-fictive excursions into such topics.

But are such inferences legitimate given the aesthetic theory the reviewer sets out? Our understanding so far takes a serious twist when we consider the following: could it not be that Andersen has set to task to write a book which investigates what it is like to have an author who frequently inserts itself into the text? Could one method of attaining this be to have created a fictive narrator with a (fictive) set of attitudes about (actual) contemporary debates and who frequently oversteps his or her position as narrator to discuss such events – events wholly tangential to the fictive fluidity of the rest of the book? Could not all of this be executed under the guise that it was inadvertently done by the factually actual author - Andersen?

The thesis is not *illogical*, however unlikely it might be. It is very doubtful that Andersen or indeed anyone would wish to make a piece of work that included aesthetically damaging elements for the purpose of... well of what? Of duping critics into thinking that such aesthetically damaging elements were done out of carelessness rather than intention? Granted, to set oneself the task of having critics believe that one unintentionally produced a poor piece of work would be a presumably thankless task.

But the possibility cannot be ruled out. And for that reason, it seems as if Kierkegaard's 'reviewer' cannot legitimately infer that the apparently extra-fictional elements of Andersen's work can be taken as evidence of his actual personality.

Recall that the reviewer defines the epic life-view as something which is 'born in secrecy and buried in silence [...] without the necessity of it ever coming to expression as such': something which could in fact go altogether 'unnoticed' (*ibid.*, 71). Given this definition it appears as if no person could ever legitimately claim that another lacked the epic life-view. Even if a person knew the factually actual Andersen *extremely well* it is still far from clear whether they would thereby have adequate grounding for saying that Andersen lacked the 'epic' element of life or not. Given this, how is it that an anonymous reviewer who 'does not know Andersen personally' can come to have knowledge of Andersen's life-view, secondarily, through what is said in the latter's novels? Perhaps all we could conclude is that there is no evidence in any of Andersen's writings that the epic life-view has been attained – but this is different to asserting that Andersen must personally lack those traits. Those elements, so characteristic of authors like Thomasine Gyllembourg, are merely consistently lacking from Andersen's authorship.

There might be another way in which the reviewer may be justified in thinking that Andersen lacks the epic life-view - perhaps Andersen lacks the requisite *life-development* for such a life view.<sup>100</sup> A life-view requires a specific life-development, and if it can be shown that Andersen lacks this life-development then it could perhaps be deduced that he simply could not have developed a life-view.

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<sup>100</sup> Here I am using Sylvia Walsh's very helpful distinction between a life-view [*Livs-Anskuelse*] and a life-development [*Livs-Udvikling*] (Walsh, 1994, 37).

Recall that Andersen was described as “a possibility of a personality ...who, in order to become a personality, needs a strong life-development” (*ibid.*, 70). We are also told that Andersen was not given the necessary ‘life-supplement’ required to develop his personality by the age, because Andersen’s ‘life-development’ took place in what the reviewer calls the ‘political-period’ (*ibid.*, 71). Under this reading it appears as if the reviewer has grounds to suspect that since Andersen lacks a proper life-development, having been born and raised in such negligent times, there can be no possibility that he developed a personality which escaped being a mere ‘web of arbitrary moods’.

The problem with this reading, however, is that it still implies that the reviewer has some knowledge of Andersen as a factually actual person. Hence, this reading still does no better at pulling the reviewer out of the contradictions outlined above, as will be shown below.

The reviewer had argued that authors whose work shows evidence that they have reached the epic stage (like Thomasine Gyllembourg for example) yield a ‘life-dividend’ from the ‘battle-won confidence in the world’ (*ibid.*, 65). Whilst this ‘life-dividend’ is not directly mentioned as being that one and the same necessary ‘life-supplement’ that the age fails to afford individuals like Andersen, I take it that both terms describe ways of gaining the necessary constituent of an existentially authentic personality. The difference in terminology, it appears, is a difference in the way the

individual comes to claim this constituent. One way is for it to be *supplemented* to the individual; the other for it to be *gained* as a dividend through one's efforts.<sup>101</sup>

If we recall an all-important passage where it is stated that the only way Andersen could have achieved the epic aspect of personality was either if he had undergone a Pythagorean study in silence, or if the age had favoured him, it was stated that the former possibility was ruled out as unfeasible given what is known of Andersen (*ibid.*, 71). It could be, then, that there are two or possibly even more ways of claiming the necessities for a life development. The idea that Andersen could receive a life-*dividend* if he honestly and earnestly faced up to his existential situation is a possibility. But it is a possibility which the reviewer, unfortunately, does not even entertain.

In fact, the reviewer had already admitted that the two options mentioned for attaining a stronger personality are *tailored* to Andersen's situation: they are the only options for an '*Andersenian*' 'transition from the lyric to the epic' (*ibid.*). Thus we cannot really make conclusions about how *any* person may develop. An 'extensive discussion of the meaning of a proper epic development' is neglected as the focus shifts to *Andersen's* specific situation (*ibid.*). The development set forth in the review is not helped by the fact that it is already tainted by what the reviewer considers to be an accurate understanding of Andersen's character ('without knowing him personally').

Thus, it is plausible that Andersen *may* have achieved the life-dividend necessary for life-development. But this viewpoint is not even been entertained by the reviewer,

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<sup>101</sup> Apart from the change in method of attainment suggested by the terms 'dividend' and 'supplement' I have failed to find any notable differences between the two terms.

given the latter's opinion of Andersen as a person. If this is correct, then the idea that Andersen's self-development was stunted because the age was one which did not foster this development is not strictly true. Andersen's development was stunted in part because of the person Andersen is, and these characteristics could have been formed for a variety of reasons, not all of which are necessarily a fault of the age.

Perhaps, it could be retorted, the character traits that Andersen exhibits were themselves formed by the negligent age? Even if this rather deterministic (and hence un-Kierkegaardian) position was maintained though, it is clear, for the reviewer at least, that one character trait can never be eradicated by the age no matter how corrupt it may be - and that is 'genius'.

Andersen's view of genius elaborated upon in *Only a Fiddler* and attacked by the reviewer is that of 'an egg that needs warmth', a pearl that 'must await the diver that brings it up to the light' (*ibid.*, 81, n.1), a delicate flame flickering in the wind. The reviewer's notion of genius is that, far from being a candle which could be extinguished by any whimsical movement the age makes, it is a flame which is only incited and blown up by the winds. For Andersen, the genius must wait for the age to afford the necessary 'life-supplement'. For the reviewer, a genius is precisely one who can and will earnestly battle through external difficulty to gain this life-supplement for themselves. The reviewer must conclude that Andersen was therefore no genius, an assertion already made multiple times throughout the review.

Another reason why the age might not be able to *totally* affect the individual's ability to develop existentially is that such a view would give a rather deterministic account

of the individual. This would contradict most of Kierkegaard's other writings, since a basic assumption of the majority of the authorship is that humans have free-will. It is quite clear, then, that if the age is partly responsible for Andersen's failings, Andersen is partly responsible too.

As of yet, it may still be wondered why we might think of *From the Papers* as being political. Furthermore, it may be questioned how useful an analysis of such a troubling and pseudonymous(/anonymous) work is. In what sense can we call *any* of the views expressed in *From the Papers* Kierkegaard's given that Kierkegaard himself went to great lengths to avoid the claim that the views expressed were his own? Such questions will be answered in the following subsection.

### 4.3 A political reading of *From the Papers*

Joakim Garff used an anecdote to end his discussion of *From the Papers*. Garff described how, a few years after the collision between Kierkegaard and Andersen, Andersen sent Kierkegaard a copy of his latest work. By that time Andersen appeared to have taken on board and appreciated some of 'Kierkegaard's' critical comments that were presented in the review. Inside Andersen's new work was a fairy tale which Garff believes was at least partly inspired by the comments from *From the Papers*. In the world-famous tale, later known as 'the ugly duckling', the main character battles with the opinions of those immediately surrounding it and in spite of the views of the latter develops into an epitome of beauty.

Garff, and most assuredly Andersen also, still took 'Kierkegaard's' review of *Only A Fiddler* to have meant that whether or not one will develop authentically in life simply depended on whether or not one was *born* a genius. If not, they will succumb to the treacherous times. But this is still adhering to a deterministic notion of being a genius by birth: a genius by some divine will or by the pure fortune of nature. Garff believes that Andersen changed his opinion later in life, with the world-famous fairy-tale: 'The Ugly Duckling'. There, Andersen apparently drops the requirement of hospitable surroundings being a requirement for genius. In Garff's words: '[...] it is no problem to be hatched by a duck pond – provided one has emerged from a swan's egg' (Garff,



2005, 145). Whilst an interesting anecdote, this result of *From the Papers* is surely not what was intended.

In Kierkegaard's doctoral thesis, his next large work after *From the Papers*, he expresses worries about what he deemed to be deterministic accounts of genius and of selfhood. The main focus of his thesis was an attack upon a false idea of the self, and of his or her relation to the external world that Kierkegaard thought romanticism extolled and popularised. Broadly speaking, for Kierkegaard the romantic placed too great of an emphasis on factors completely outside of the individual's control (and not enough emphasis on those within the individual's control). 'Genius', for example, tended to be thought of as a divine gift, or as a thing that some were born with but that others were not. Andersen, though not a romantic, has an equally passive view of genius. In *Only a Fiddler* genius is, for Andersen, something *both* that one is necessarily born with *and* that must be catered for by the respective age. Andersen may have dropped the second requirement in due of Kierkegaard's *From the Papers*. But Kierkegaard would be equally against the idea that one is a genius *from birth*.

Against romanticism and Andersen, Kierkegaard's idea of genius, a concept that has a remarkable consistency throughout his authorship, is always focussed upon those factors *within* the individual's control. The traits of a true genius are willpower and determination, not only in spite of but precisely in the face of unfortunate circumstances. And willpower in the face of external impingements also happens to be a large element of authentic existential development – especially in politically and socially sub-optimal conditions.

Thus, *From the Papers* includes a number of themes that are informative of Kierkegaard's political position. In *From the Papers*, a number of socio-political factors that are completely outside of the individual's control are acknowledged and admitted of playing a not insignificant role in hindering an individual's ability to develop existentially. In a previous age, that is to say, under different socio-political circumstances, Andersen could have had fewer obstacles to his existential development and perhaps even communal aid. In *From the Papers*, however, it is clear that socio-political factors alone are never the sole deciding factor with regards to existential development. Observations regarding Andersen's specific character traits frequently remind us that the latter also play a large role in explaining Andersen's existential impoverishment.

If we *did* believe that socio-political factors wholly determined Andersen's personality traits, then we would be led into a kind of logic that limits existential development to factors completely outside of the individual's control. This kind of thinking would involve a kind of passivity akin to both Andersen's and the romantic's view of genius, a type of passivity Kierkegaard fiercely fights against.

Kierkegaard probably did not have a fully worked out theory of the political when he wrote *From the Papers*. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard does show that he is willing to examine the relationship between socio-economic forces and individual, existential development. The piece on Andersen therefore provides us with an early case study of the dangerous existential effects socio-political forces might create. Kierkegaard would still need to work out what boundaries ought to exist for us to legitimately say that a political entity has transgressed its legitimate scope. That is to say, Kierkegaard

does not yet show evidence of delineating the role that political entities play in legitimately relating to political and hence non-political entities. But this early piece shows us why Kierkegaard might have had existential concerns that would prompt him to examine this relationship and hence develop a theory of the political.

We can also note that in Kierkegaard's later political writings the socio-political factors of the age are quite radically from this earlier piece. With these changes, Kierkegaard recognises that the hindrances the age create are much greater than those in Andersen's case. This prompts a number of alterations to the early and perhaps emerging understanding of theory of the political hinted at in *From the Papers*.

One change, for example, is that the possible relation between Andersen's own character traits and the socio-political trends of the age is finally given a little more clarification in Kierkegaard's later political position. Many of the character traits that limit Andersen's ability to develop existentially (later classified as traits exemplary of the aesthetic way of life) are later seen as ones that an age might inadvertently subsidise and foster. In this sense, Andersen becomes less of a case study and more of a representative of a wider social phenomenon. Thus, Kierkegaard will later examine how an illegitimate political action will existentially affect *all* individuals – or the 'typical' individual found in a specific age. This allows for a broader theory of the political than can be found in *From the Papers*. This 'broader' theory of the political will be examined in the next chapter. Yet the origins of it can be seen in this early work. This provides at least one good reason for thinking that Kierkegaard was more interested in political issues throughout his authorship than is otherwise acknowledged.

Kierkegaard's late political thought differs with regards to this earlier work in another important way. In his final political writings, Kierkegaard advocates the *removal* of one of the obstacles to existential development – the Danish state-church marriage solidified by the (then new) constitution of 1849. Once more, the reflexivity of Kierkegaard's political position is highlighted, as it evolves in direct response to a (socio-)political change. In *From the Papers* it is not quite worked out how much of the responsibility for not developing existentially is the fault of Andersen himself and how much is due to the deficiencies of the age. Throughout his authorship, Kierkegaard maintains the optimistic belief that the individual is always still partly responsible for existential deepening.

In Kierkegaard's latest articulations of his theory of the political, however, he finally adds a caveat to this view. As Denmark undergoes social-political changes that are exceptionally debilitating to existential development, Kierkegaard's authorial task also shifts focus. Kierkegaard finally reaches a position where he believes that the majority of people could be helped existentially if he attacked the legitimacy of these political changes, rather than solely focussing on guiding the individual towards inward deepening regardless of external hindrances. Thus, Kierkegaard's emphasis accordingly changes from one of producing existentially upbuilding literature to a more polemical attack against the established state/church marriage. Nevertheless, if Kierkegaard was not sure where the burden of responsibility lay in *From the Papers* – on targeting an existential impoverishment by improving the inward development of the individual or by changing the external situation – it was something that appears to have been worked out in his mature theory of the political. We will outline this (and

more) aspect(s) of Kierkegaard's theory of the political when we examine Kierkegaard's late authorship (in chapters five and six below.)

The consequences of reading *From the Papers* politically therefore include the following: firstly, Kierkegaard's final political writings are, far from being an anomaly, a central part of the authorship. Secondly, Kierkegaard's political view can be shown to be highly responsive in nature. This entails that Kierkegaard is more interested and aware of the external socio-political situation than has often been thought of him. And the third result of this reading is that it opens up the hypothesis that Kierkegaard might have been politically minded throughout his entire authorship. Not only do some of the themes in this early work get worked and reworked in Kierkegaard's final writings; but at least one notion, that of 'genius', is held consistently throughout the entire authorship (see n.89 above).

All of this might be true; and yet this is not to say that *From the Papers* is not still a deeply problematic work. The work is, after all, an arguably pseudonymous publication of an anonymous reviewer. All of the central points of Kierkegaard's theory of the political are articulated by this anonymous reviewer. Furthermore, the work was intended to be published in a journal with a specialised intellectual leaning. The work could also be considered as a corrective to a Hegelian-inspired philosophy that had become prevalent. To increase complexity, multiple pragmatic factors may have played a role in altering the text. Finally, Kierkegaard does not even acknowledge this early work as part of his authorship.<sup>102</sup> Given all this, what, if anything, can we take from the review?

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<sup>102</sup> See note 122 above, and 160 below.

I think that Watkins' theory of this work as being somewhat experimental is an essential way of understanding the text. A large amount of the above discussion centred on the idea that some of the fundamental claims of the review were philosophically untenable. The reviewer argues that if the 'epic-development' had been undertaken then it would leave a trace in an author's writings. Similarly, a piece of work will reveal tell-tale signs that the author remains within the 'lyrical' aspect of writing. Yet, it simply cannot be *absolutely* ruled out that an author could have personally undergone this 'epic-development' and yet still have decided to write in a way that completely belied that fact. Thus, the central argument of the work – that from Andersen's work(s) we can deduce that he has not passed through the 'epic-development' – is not philosophically justified in the text.

In a similar fashion, I do not think that Kierkegaard's theory of the political is fully formed in this text. As far as this text is concerned, Kierkegaard still needs to give an account of the relationship between the detrimental affects a political practice can have on the person and to what degree an individual can be expected to overcome the former, in the pursuit of spiritual development. Nevertheless, *From the Papers* shows that Kierkegaard attempted to formulate a working theory of the relationship between social factors and the existential development of persons, and so early on in his literary career (indeed, in what was arguably his debut piece). Hence, we need not concern ourselves with the hermeneutical problems surrounding the intention of the publication of the piece. The fact would still remain that Kierkegaard engaged with certain issues and that he took these issues up and re-worked them throughout his authorship.

We can also disregard, to an extent, questions concerning whether the views that are articulated in the piece can properly be said to belong to 'Kierkegaard'. An answer to this question will be given by analysing Kierkegaard's other works including those explicitly written under his own name and seeing what resemblances and consistencies the views expressed in the latter share with the former. If *From the Papers* contains only a rough theory of the political then at least it shows a determination to ask questions concerning the relation between the political and the non-political. Despite the fact that the theory is far from complete, I will defend the claim that it is a fair expression of Kierkegaard's own concerns and beliefs by showing how the focal concerns of *From the Papers* are the same as those that inform Kierkegaard's theory of the political in his late authorship. This will be shown by an examination of the latter works in relation to the former.

*From the Papers* is quite possibly one of Kierkegaard's most neglected works and is even still largely ignored in modern Kierkegaard scholarship. (This is most likely partly because of the numerous hermeneutical complexities involved in a study of the text.) Yet *From the Papers* shows proof of the young Kierkegaard interested in social questions and evidence that could contradict the claim that Kierkegaard was not at all interested in politics. We could even tentatively suggest that the scholarly neglect of political or social readings of *From the Papers* and the fact that Kierkegaard is not often thought of as a politically interested philosopher might be related. One of the central claims of this thesis is that Kierkegaard engaged in political writings throughout his authorship, i.e., that it is not just an aberration, but is a central aspect of his thought and of his principal, existential interests. I also wish to argue that many

of the themes in his earlier authorship informed those of Kierkegaard's final theory of the political. A failure to appreciate the idea that Kierkegaard was politically minded as early on as in 1838 (when he was just twenty-five) could stem from the fact that *From the Papers* is an admittedly troublesome and obscure work, far less read than some of Kierkegaard's later major works. I have attempted to remedy somewhat the little attention *From the Papers* has received by showing that it can be given a political reading, as well as by bringing it into relation with Kierkegaard's more popular works (throughout the remainder of this thesis).

In the next chapter I will look at one of Kierkegaard's more popular and more obviously socio-political works – *Two Ages*. Some of the political themes that had arisen in *From the Papers* will be worked out in more detail in this later political piece. One example will be Kierkegaard's treatment of the complexities of the impact of social and political pressures on the individual's existential development. Furthermore, the theory of the political that was outlined in chapter three will be more obviously at the fore of this work. Yet despite being an ostensibly quite political work, *Two Ages* contains frequent cautions with regards to the application of Kierkegaard's theory of the political. Such cautions against developing a positive political programme from his thought were voiced, we recall, with Kierkegaard's outline of his theory of the political in the various writings from 1846-1851 (which were the subject of chapter three). *Two Ages*, published in 1846, was therefore written during or before much of Kierkegaard's developed theory of the political. Nevertheless, *Two Ages* adheres to Kierkegaard's theory of the political in all respects. *Two Ages* also investigates political issues that are similar to those that were the central focus of *From the Papers* but develops those issues and thus differs from *From the Papers* in



some important respects. Examining some of the differences and similarities between this later work and Kierkegaard's debut piece will help further elucidate Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political in general, and will therefore be the focus of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### Kierkegaard's 'Aesthetic' Age and its Political Consequences.

#### Introduction.

That Kierkegaard delineated three existential life-styles, the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious, is a well-known tenet of his philosophy.<sup>103</sup> Despite this, the idea that these existential 'spheres' relate to changes in the external environment, such as political changes, has received little attention. I argue that in his work *Two Ages* [hereafter simply; TA], Kierkegaard shows that the spheres of existence are in fact in large part reliant upon the socio-political establishments and practices of an age.

A consequence of this reading is that it gives us insight into why Kierkegaard may have called his (or any) age an 'aesthetic' age.<sup>104</sup> The use of an existential term for an age would otherwise be somewhat of a peculiarity in the authorship.

There are other consequences of this reading. One is that it gives us more evidence for suggesting that Kierkegaard was not philosophising in complete disregard to changes

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<sup>103</sup> For a brief guide to these 'spheres', see n.58 above.

<sup>104</sup> Or 'esthetic' – see n.110 below.

in the external world – i.e., that he was not a mere subjectivist. In *Two Ages*, Kierkegaard highlights how one's existential development ought to be reflexive to external conditions. A change in the objective, political conditions may fundamentally alter the way one develops one's 'life-view'. Such changes might also render the intended effects of ethico-religious activity 'impotent'. This could even imply that a person engaged in becoming an existentially authentic subject may become required to participate in a specific kind of political action in order to continue their existential development.

The final consequence of this reading is that we may have grounds for rejecting political changes that negatively affect the existential development of the citizenry of its intended policy. Political efforts which hinder one's religious development are by standards of state neutrality, at least, liable to be revised or rejected on the grounds that the political realm and the religious space of the individual are to be kept separate.

In putting forward these theses I shall also consequently argue against the position that Kierkegaard came to neglect the 'ethical' aspect of existential development, a thought-provoking view which Daniel Conway has recently advocated (Conway, 1999). Instead, I shall maintain the thesis that social and political factors influence the existential spheres by arguing that the ethical way of life is actually only rendered *ineffective* (contra Conway's argument that Kierkegaard neglects it) by those socio-political practices. I argue that this has existentially crippling consequences in that it fosters aestheticism. As such, I argue that this is another reason we might call an age an 'aesthetic' age.

## 5.1 An 'aesthetic' age.

Many scholars have noted that near the end of his authorship, Kierkegaard calls his age an 'aesthetic' one.<sup>105</sup> This is somewhat of a novelty: the authorship that had preceded this comment reserved the terms 'aesthetic', 'ethical', and 'religious', exclusively for the *individual*. In general, however, Kierkegaard's varying aesthetes are represented as akin to hedonists, seekers of pleasure (or at least 'the interesting' as in the case of 'A' [E/O I]) with no concern for one of the most fundamental ethical principles: that of treating others as ends in themselves.

Kierkegaard's earlier authorship (*Either/Or I, Stages on Life's Way* [hereafter simply; SLW] and *Repetition*) represented aesthetes as individual people and gave no intimation of using this term to describe an *age*. In fact, on numerous occasions Kierkegaard had expressed the opinion that an age does *not* develop dialectically in the way an individual can.<sup>106</sup>

Kierkegaard typically thought that the opinion that an entire *age* had developed dialectically was a convenient way of presenting individuals with an excuse not to bother developing *themselves* ethico-religiously. One born in an age which is inherently ethical or religious was thought to be *eo ipso* an ethical or religious person,

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<sup>105</sup> For example, see: Darlymple (2009, 169, 193); Perkins (1999a, 178; 2009, 318); Pattison (1992, 62; 1999, 18; 1999b, 16); and Tajaferce (1999a, 69).

<sup>106</sup> A view point apparently held from the beginning of the authorship. See for example, *From the Papers*, the focal work of the previous chapter (EPW, 61-65). See also: JP III, 2910: "Christianly there is only the question of the New Testament, *with which every generation has to begin*" (my emphasis).

so long as one unquestioningly conformed to the ethico-religious practices already established. This view, ironically, happens to foster the kind of mindset that *prevents* the individual from attaining ethical and religious development. For it neglects features of ethico-religious development that Kierkegaard thought necessary: the individual's personal, subjective, and passionate appropriation of the life-view. Given Kierkegaard's insistence on these latter qualities we may ask again: what sense does it make to call an *age* aesthetic?

Perhaps an age *could* be called aesthetic precisely because the prevalent practices and ideology of that age are marked by the same elements of the aesthetic way of life e.g., a dispassionate willingness to go along with the status quo, coupled with an absolute aversion to the kind of personal choice required to lead one into the ethical or religious ways of life. Under such an interpretation, Kierkegaard could still maintain it is impossible for an age to be an 'ethical age', or a 'religious age', (for no ideological view or cultural practice could be such that it leads the individual into the ethical or religious way of life, given the requirements of personal, subjective appropriation, unique to these latter two existential spheres), though there would not be anything inconsistent in calling an age 'aesthetic'. Therefore, Kierkegaard could still deem it impossible for an 'age' to develop, for an age could be aesthetic but could never go on to be ethical or religious.

This reading is problematic for two reasons though. The first is that surely an age *could* be an 'aesthetic age', as Kierkegaard stated that his was. But if the claim that a given age is aesthetic is to be meaningful then any given age also might *not* be aesthetic. Let us assume that the default position of an age is, as is arguably the case

with individuals, aesthetic. If the age cannot develop beyond this then Kierkegaard's expression of his own age as being an 'aesthetic age' would appear to be an altogether vacuous comment: so is every other age. Presumably then, an age might not be aesthetic; and presumably a 'non-aesthetic age' is a development in comparison to an 'aesthetic age'.

Assumptions aside, the second problem with the above reading is that it appears to overlook a key Kierkegaardian theme, namely that of the absolute priority of the *individual* to all other categories.<sup>107</sup> To call an 'age' aesthetic could surely not mean that every individual in that age is an aesthete, or even that the majority are. Such a generalisation would be a disregard of the unique development of every individual in that age which is characteristically un-Kierkegaardian. Besides, wholehearted engagement in the established cultural norms could not count as irrefutable evidence that such a person is therefore an aesthete, given that the bustling 'tax collector' who has reached the highest state of religious development could be, from the perspective of outward behaviours, exactly the same in appearance as an aesthete.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> This notion [in Danish: *Den Enkelte*] appears in many places in Kierkegaard's authorship. In 1846, (in what Kierkegaard considered to be the beginning of the authorship; see n.78 above) Kierkegaard dedicates his signed, religious work *Upbuilding Discourses In Various Spirits* to 'that individual'. At the end of his authorship when Kierkegaard gives an explanation for his whole opus, he gives three successive chapters on the term – 'the single individual' alone, in which he also links the term to 'that individual' in the dedication of *Upbuilding Discourses In Various Spirits* (TPV, 109). The three chapters are named: '"The Single Individual": Two "Notes" Concerning My Work as an Author' (TPV, 101-104); 'For the Dedication to "That Single Individual"' (TPV, 105-112); and 'A Word on the Relation of My Work as an Author to "the Single Individual"' (TPV, 113-123). Thus Kierkegaard's authorial project appears to have been concerned with 'the single individual' from the very beginning.

<sup>108</sup> Edward Mooney argues that there can be a 'test' to show how the knight of faith might be outwardly distinguishable (from any mere tax collector or/and, we may add, aesthete). It is this: the 'knight of faith' faithfully believes that there will be an elaborate dinner waiting for him or her at home, despite the fact that practical sensibility would tell them that there is absolutely no reason to believe that such a meal exists! (Mooney, 1996, 45). But we surely *can* imagine a person engaging in this behaviour for (albeit peculiar) aesthetic fancy. *Outwardly*, the two would be imperceptible. In later works, however, Kierkegaard argues that true Christianity will necessarily manifest itself externally (see, for example: JP II, 1120; FSE, 18, cf., JP II, 2119).

Arguably, it is inwardness alone that separates the life-views. Thus, it is doubtful that Kierkegaard would diagnose an age as aesthetic based merely on the outward appearances of individuals. When Kierkegaard calls an age 'aesthetic', then, I take it that he must mean simply this: that the conditions of the age are such that it tends to (inadvertently or not) foster the 'aesthetic' existential life-view, or hinder the other possible life-views, perhaps simply by removing or making more difficult the necessary conditions for these latter two life-views.

What reasons have other Kierkegaard scholars given for suggesting that an age may be 'aesthetic'? The scholarship has presented an interesting array of mixed and not necessarily mutually exclusive suggestions. Perhaps an age may be justifiably deemed aesthetic because the supposed ethical and religious practices also covertly espouse aesthetic values. In his article 'Kierkegaard's "Instant Writing"', Perkins defends this line of argument concluding that in Christendom, the state-church marriage that occurred in Kierkegaard's day, aestheticism 'triumphs' (Perkins, 2009, 318). In the same volume [*The Moment and Late Writings: International Kierkegaard Commentary*], Timothy Darlymple backs this reading up by showing how widespread and supposedly ethico-religious sermons and artworks on the sufferings of Christ were also used to provoke aesthetic, not religious, sentiments (Darlymple, 2009; especially pp. 169, 193).

In another work, Perkins extends his argument, claiming that Kierkegaard's criticism of the aestheticism inherent in Christendom is really a critique of the 'modern hedonism' (Perkins, 1999a, 178) inherent in the modern age. The charge here is that

the aesthetic way of life is a modern phenomenon. The criticisms of the aesthetic way of life are in part criticisms of a distinctive feature of modernity (*ibid.*, 171).

Begonya Tajafuerce gives a similar reading, claiming that Kierkegaard's attack on his age could be presented 'in aesthetic-literary terms' against 'the aesthetic status quo' (Tajafuerce, 1999a, 69). By this, Tajafuerce means that Kierkegaard's attack is:

...against aesthetic conventionalism and indifferentism, understood both as the paradigmatic expression of 'apathetic indolence' and as 'stagnation' [*Stilstanden*] in reflection. It is directed against aesthetic hollowness, which eventually turns into the celebrated pattern of an abstract anything-goes... (*ibid.*)

Finally, George Pattison argues that Kierkegaard might have called his age 'aesthetic' because his Danish contemporaries were practising a philosophy which assimilated both the aesthetic and the political, mixing the two categories indistinguishably together. For Pattison, this led to paving 'the way for the kind of transfer of aesthetic categories into social and political categories that we find [in] Kierkegaard, both in the *Literary Review* [TA] and, e.g., in *The Point of View*' (Pattison, 1999b, 16).<sup>109</sup>

In another work of the same year Pattison correctly remarks that Kierkegaard's designation of his age as an aesthetic one is "[...] a strong claim and is not immediately or adequately justified in its context in *The Point of View*" (Pattison, 1999a, 17). Instead, Pattison suggests that a reading across all of Kierkegaard's works is necessary to validate this claim. In his informative study, '*Poor Paris!*', Pattison

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<sup>109</sup> This builds from an earlier work of Pattison's where he had described Kierkegaard's experience of Established Christendom, as well as the age itself as 'aesthetic': (Pattison, 1992; 62).



seeks to show that it is “[...] *the representation of the city* as an aesthetic phenomenon [through Kierkegaard’s entire authorship, that] underwrites Kierkegaard’s claim that it is the age as a whole (and not just a random sample of decadent individuals) that is ‘aesthetic’” (*ibid.*, 18: my emphasis).

Pattison’s study is both impressive and extensive, and I shall also argue that Kierkegaard criticised his age for being as an aesthetic one.<sup>110</sup> But I take the justification of this claim to be a little simpler. As I see it, we only really have to look in *one* of Kierkegaard’s works, *Two Ages*, to see why Kierkegaard qualified his age as aesthetic. For in that book Kierkegaard sets out to do exactly what I have suggested would be necessary to judge an age as ‘aesthetic’. Kierkegaard assesses the various practices that the ‘present age’ engages in and analyses the impact they have on inwardness. In doing so, Kierkegaard highlights the ways that these practices affect the conditions required for the ethical and religious life-views: passion, individuality, personal space to relate to God and to others, and so forth. The outcome is that the present age inadvertently ‘favours’ the aesthetic way of life and makes more demanding, perhaps even ineffective, the ethical and religious ways of life.

The fact that a state favours an aesthetic over a genuinely religious way of life by inadvertently subsidising the former and taxing the latter may be seen by a contemporary reader as a direct infringement of liberal politics. For one thing, liberal

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<sup>110</sup> It should be noted that, as far as I know, Kierkegaard never explicitly called his age an ‘aesthetic age’ in such terms. But he comes close to it. The closest, albeit scattered remarks can be found in *The Point of View*. Here Kierkegaard says, for example, that: ‘If in a word I were to express my judgement of the age, I would say: It lacks religious upbringing. To become and be a Christian has become a banality. The esthetic plainly has the upper hand’ and; ‘The misfortune of our age is precisely that it has become merely *time* by itself’ (*ibid.*; 78 and 104 respectively: original emphasis). And in drafts of the work Kierkegaard lets on to more. Kierkegaard imagines himself to have been in ‘an age that has sunk to [depths] of commonsensicality’; an age that ‘had gone astray and [was] bogged down in “the interesting”... [requiring the help of] an esthetic author’; and ‘an age of disintegration, an esthetic, enervating disintegration’ (*ibid.*; 218, 262, and 276 respectively).

politics typically hold that the state ought to be neutral towards individual's attempts at the good life (given that it does not infringe others of the same right to do so, and so on). A second, related point is that the state ought not to interfere with the individual's freedom to pursue religious development, so long as that religious development does not itself violate state laws. Whilst Kierkegaard may have had rather prescient forebodings of the problems that could occur if these liberal principles were violated, it would be anachronistic to attribute these modern liberal ideas to Kierkegaard in such a straightforward fashion at least. Whether Kierkegaard *did* have (or *should* have had) supported political action to remedy the ailments of the 'present age' will be assessed throughout this chapter. This in turn will link back to the earlier discussion of whether Kierkegaard ought to have a positive political programme or not (i.e., to section 2.2 above). In assessing Kierkegaard's view of the present, aesthetic age, we will also uncover more nuances of his theory of the political.

## 5.2 The 'present age'.

Thus far the term 'present age' has been given in inverted commas. This is because Kierkegaard occasionally used the term to simply refer to his age, i.e. the time period and place he lived and wrote in: nineteenth century Denmark. In some ways this is a far cry from the *present* 'present age'. Yet in his book *Two Ages: A Literary Review*, Kierkegaard also occasionally uses the term 'present age' as a philosophical rather than an empirical concept. For example, Kierkegaard says that he engages in '... an analysis of the present age in terms of the dialectical category-qualifications ['leveling', 'the public', etc.] and their implications, *regardless of their being factually present at the given moment or not*' (TA, 76: my emphasis. See p. 96 for a very similar comment).

Kierkegaard's task is, I take it, twofold. He certainly wishes to delineate 'the distinctive characteristics of the age' and to 'evaluate' (though not judge) them (*ibid.*, 32, 110). A great deal of excellent Kierkegaard scholarship has already helped to further delineate the various complex 'dialectical category-qualifications' Kierkegaard attributes to the present age.<sup>111</sup> But the other aspect of Kierkegaard's project is to undertake a similar exercise that Fru Gyllembourg had in the original novel, '*To Tidsaldre*' (*Two Ages*), here under review by Kierkegaard. Where Gyllembourg

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<sup>111</sup> For the concept of 'Levelling' (Hannay's spelling, with two 'L's'), see for example: Hannay, 2003, 163-178; for 'Envy', see: Perkins, 1984a, 107-132; 'Passion' and 'Reflection', see: Roberts, 1984, 87-106; for ethical and social relations, see: Søltoft, 1999, 110-129.

portrayed the effects that the differing ages had on the familial life and social relations of the characters of her novel, Kierkegaard wished to analyse how the age affects the typical individual.

Kierkegaard does not imply that an age will necessarily produce a certain kind of individual. This fatalistic way of thinking would go against much of what Kierkegaard has to say not only about individual choice but individual self-constitution too. The individual is in part defined by the age, and vice-versa (*ibid.*, 47), but never reducibly so.<sup>112</sup> Thus Kierkegaard can concede that:

The most extreme variant can appear in any and every age; for example, a man who could be said to belong essentially in the Middle Ages or in Greece could be living in our age.... The question is... [what kind of person may] appear as *typical* in the present age' (*ibid.*, 33, original emphasis).

Given that the present age is later called an 'aesthetic' age (as we noted previously) it may be thought that Kierkegaard comes to conclude that the present age is one where aesthetic individuals are *typically* encountered. But what do we (and Kierkegaard above) mean here by 'typical'? We can interpret this in two ways: 1) the aesthetic

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<sup>112</sup> Much of the literature on Kierkegaard's political thought has emphasised the ontologically necessary relation the individual has to the external world it finds itself in; be those relations to external institutions or social relations. Mooney is a good example of the former: "The self is a relation related 'downward' to itself, to the power that grounds it, and 'outward' to its sphere of interpersonal activity. We make sense of a self (at any given stage of development) by specifying the relational, reflexive field it constitutes. This means sketching its connections to various persons, institutions and projects [...]" (Mooney, 1996; 95). Plekon also gives a complimentary reading: "the individual is always located or grounded within the confines of an array of relationships, ranging from those of the biological species to the social bonds of the family, church, and nation." (Plekon, 1982, 70. See also pp. 71 and 80). For other examples of scholars who have noted that Kierkegaard's authentic individual is ontologically committed to relating to the external world, see for example: Crites (1992, pp. 150, 155); Dunning (1985, 242); Elrod (1981, pp. 74-75 and 188-89); Evans (2006, 268 and on); Hannay (2003, 68); and Plekon (1992, 11).

individual is most 'commonly' found, i.e., the aesthetic way of life is the majority life-view held, or 2) the aesthetic way of life is 'typical' of the age in the way that it exemplifies, or is a product of, 'the distinctive characteristics of the age'.

It does not seem to be merely a matter of numbers, and so the first interpretation is questionable. For it is indicated that in the previous age, the age of revolution, the person one typically encountered was still an aesthetic individual.<sup>113</sup> The masses still looked to the ethical or religious exemplar for guidance on self-development, the latter being a minority. Even if it were the case that the majority of people encountered in the age of revolution were aesthetes, it still does not appear that this alone would warrant us to term the age an 'aesthetic age'. The reasons an age can be called 'aesthetic' then, are indeed to do with the way the individual relates to the distinctive characteristics of the age. A study of the differences in the *ethical* and *religious* spheres between 'the present age' and the 'age of revolution' will, perhaps surprisingly given our interest in the *aesthetic*, nevertheless best highlight what it is that warrants us in calling an age 'aesthetic'.

#### 5.2.1 The distinctive characteristics of 'the present age'.

In the 'age of revolution' then, Kierkegaard admits that aesthetic individuals exist, but they relate differently to those who have attained the ethical and religious ways of life. Kierkegaard gives a description of an ice skater to draw a distinction between both

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<sup>113</sup> The 'age of revolution' is Kierkegaard's term for the age which proceeds the present age. See: TA (pp. 61-67).

ages. An ice skater glides perilously close to a point on the ice where it is dangerously thin but manages, with expert effortlessness, to make a last second turn back to safety, thereby showing the whole thing to have been a deliberate trick (*ibid.*, 72-73). In the age of revolution, this feat would command respect from onlookers. The onlookers would, impressed by the performance, be given fresh impetus to pursue their prospective tasks, whatever they may be. The commitment which had gone into rehearsing such a trick and the bravery of executing it would be admired and people would be inspired to develop themselves ethically in a like-minded manner (*ibid.*, 72).

The present age, however, is marked by an unnaturally high amount of rationalisation in place of action. (We might call this an example of a 'distinctive characteristic of the age'.) Thus, Kierkegaard describes the onlookers of the present age as prompted by the skater into a practical-minded debate about whether or not the action was one which should be mimicked. Undoubtedly they would have to agree that whilst an interesting spectacle to observe from a safe distance such an action is just not a *sensible* one to imitate. The onlookers would also, if they reasoned long enough, console themselves with the thought that if they had invested the impractical amount of time and effort into becoming capable of performing the feat themselves then they could just have easily performed the trick as well. Rather than admiring their fellow then the onlookers use the display to find admiration in themselves; in the fact that they *could* have performed the trick, but are practical and wise enough to devote their time and effort to other more sensible tasks instead. We can see that the passion stirred in the individuals of the present age (and Kierkegaard at least admits that

passion has not been *wholly* stifled by an abundance of rationality<sup>114</sup>) is not one of personal development in light of an imitation-worthy project, but is instead an indifferent passivism which seeks to justify the status quo.

This explains Kierkegaard's comment that '...the age of *the great and good action* is past' (*ibid.*, 71: my emphasis). Occasionally Kierkegaard makes a stronger claim: he says that in the present age 'there is no hero, no lover, no thinker, no knight of faith [...]' (*ibid.*, 75). As an ontological claim - that such ways of life are rendered impossible by the age - this is not given any philosophical justification. In fact, such a reading would be at odds with Kierkegaard's earlier claim that any variant of a person '...can appear in any and every age' (*ibid.*, 33). Therefore, I take it to be the less demanding claim that such figures are disabled from having the same kind of impact that they previously did: they no longer inspire ethico-religious development. That is to say, even though it is possible that such figures exist in the present age their actions are viewed by the majority as further justifications for preserving the status quo of the present age! If we take 'hero' to mean one who inspires ethico-religious action, then no hero exists in the present age.

Kierkegaard pushes this point in another vivid example (*ibid.*, 86-87). He asks us to imagine that three men are maltreating a single fourth one. Outnumbered and overpowered by the sheer number of the assailants, the victim is relatively defenceless. Onlookers to this abuse finally become so restless that three of them lay into one of the original assailants. They justify their actions as so: 'He had it coming, he himself

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<sup>114</sup> Kierkegaard, for example, still refers to 'flashes of enthusiasm' occurring in the present age (TA; 74). Other evidence that rationality has not completely ruled out passion is also attested to elsewhere, for example: "That a person stands or falls on his action is *becoming* obsolete" (TA; 73, my emphasis) and; "actions, rash leaps, can still be taken [in the present age]" (TA; 71).

had partaken in ganging up against a defenceless individual', etc. The irony of the situation is strikingly obvious, but the point of the parable perhaps less so.

Kierkegaard's claim is that the abandonment of individual, passionate development has gone hand in hand with an unbalanced focus on the numerical in the present age. Again, the focus is on imbalance. Just as with rationality, Kierkegaard accepts that the numerical has a legitimate scope. Practices such as balloting are acceptable and even praise-worthy when the decision in hand is a legitimately political one - whether or not a new road ought to be built, for example. (We examined the legitimate use of numerical means in politics, for example, in chapter three above.) When it comes to answering ethico-religious questions about what is right and wrong, and how one ought to act and live, however, a solution by 'majority vote' is out of place. Acting in conformity to a majority vote once again abandons the personal, subjective reasons for acting and thus is *eo ipso* not acting ethically or religiously.

The onlookers' protest attests to the fact that just because three people think an action is morally acceptable it does not necessarily make it so. But their proposed remedy instantly betrays that original sentiment as they take matters into their own hands and, backed up by the opinion of two others, think it is just to assail one of the original assailants. In a similar way, Kierkegaard goes on to argue that that the remedy for the disproportionate interest in the numerical, which is a distinctive characteristic of the present age, cannot be solved *politically*, because politics itself is yet another numerically guided practice. It would be, so to speak, yet another way of justifying the prevailing opinion that matters in how one ought to live and act are to be



determined by numerical strength alone. But this is precisely what we were seeking to combat! Kierkegaard expresses this point as follows:

...the moment it [politics] wants to halt leveling, it will once again exemplify the law [of leveling]. It [leveling] can only be halted if the individual, in individual separateness, gains the intrepidity of religiousness (*ibid.*, 86).<sup>115</sup>

When Kierkegaard complains that the present age is typified by an excessive interest in the numerical, this has a second important implication. For Kierkegaard, the ethical realm is also involved with the finite, the universal, and the temporal<sup>116</sup>. Presumably, the previous quote could also adequately sum up any and every attempt at opposing the aestheticism inherent in the present age with ethical action. A single individual attempting to combat the inordinate emphasis of the numerical qualifications so characteristic of the present through ethical action would presumably be as ill-received as the example of the ice skater cited above. Far from being an example of *distinction* as it was in the previous age, any ethical action would become yet another occasion for aesthetic individuals to integrate themselves back into the numerical comfort of the public by scoffing the ethical distinction of their contemporary as ultimately evidence of an *impractical* degree of existential striving.

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<sup>115</sup> 'Leveling', briefly put, is the tendency for the people and institutions of an age to attempt to standardise the physical and psychical traits that human beings have. Since this concept informs Kierkegaard's view of genuine sociability, it will also be discussed in sections '7.3' and '7.4' below.

<sup>116</sup> We ought to note that Kierkegaard had elsewhere argued that one could give a *theonomous* account of ethics. He called this system of ethics 'second-ethics' (CA, 20-21, *passim*). Nevertheless, the terms 'ethical realm', and 'ethics' employed here, as in *Two Ages*, refer to ethics as we ordinarily conceive of it: the attempt at *autonomously* becoming an ethically responsible agent (a project which Kierkegaard elsewhere argues is ultimately doomed to fail).

All this may be said to neglect Kierkegaard's so-called 'second ethics' though (CA, 20-21). The 'second ethics' is a system of ethics that realises the inherent failure and limitations of any ethical system that presumes itself to be self-sufficient. The 'second ethics' presupposes an external other, something outside of 'the universal', a value-giver – God. If this is the Christian God then this system of 'second ethics' would also include Christian concepts such as grace and forgiveness – notions which are otherwise completely out of place in an ethical system which is thought to be self-sufficient and reliant upon the autonomy of responsible agents alone. Since second-ethics is partially reliant on the realm of the infinite, it may offer a way of combatting the levelling tendencies of an age without ultimately only exemplifying them.

Loving one's neighbour, for example, could be an example of an action performed with an understanding of second-ethics. Yet whilst Kierkegaard would agree that this action manages to challenge levelling without once more exemplifying it, he ultimately argues that even *this* ethico-religious action will have no effect in the present age. Loving one's neighbour, Kierkegaard argues, will be interpreted by those entrenched within the crowd as a single individual acting out of sheer pride (*ibid.*, 90). In fact, Kierkegaard argues that in the terrible situation which typifies the present age, *all* action which deviates from that of the crowd, which includes religious and ethical action, will "...only be met with indolence" (*ibid.*, 104). Similarly: "intense enthusiasm will be misunderstood as grand folly, wholly impractical" (*ibid.*, 111). These are very worrying claims. What are we to make of them, especially given the fact that Kierkegaard would go on to portray an ideal society where love of one's neighbour and genuine sociability are pivotal practices? (This will be looked at in depth in sections 7.3, and 7.4 below.)

The claim that 'works of love' will have no effect in the present age is not only disheartening but is also not immediately justified (empirically or philosophically). We will examine Kierkegaard's reasons for making this claim shortly. For now, let us note that such claims do at least highlight why Kierkegaard became increasingly sceptical of the possibility that the 'ethical' way of life (including both the 'first' and 'second' ethics) would help the typical person encountered in the present age. A sceptic might even think that the ethical realm disappears *altogether*. I shall maintain that the ethical still remains the middle term between the religious and the aesthetic. Yet I claim that within the context of the present age, Kierkegaard argues that it becomes impossible for an ethical person to *teach* or be an *exemplar* for a fellow, typical individual. If this is the case, then the ethical way of life, *qua* possible way of ordering one's actions does not disappear; but *qua* method of addressing and existentially improving one's peers, it becomes inept.

The claim that ethical teaching vanishes does swerve somewhat from the authorship hitherto and deserves justification. How, for example, did Judge William attempt to help his aesthete friend take the decision to move from the aesthetic to the ethical way of life? - by explaining to the latter that the aesthetic way of life was self-defeating, and that the ethical way of life was *aesthetically* superior to the aesthetic way of life. If the reason the age is termed an 'aesthetic age' is, as Perkins has argued, that the prevalent mindset of people in the 'aesthetic age' is one geared toward practical sensibility and self-concern, an aesthete living in the present age may coolly decide to live ethically as simply a more *practical* way of living.<sup>117</sup> This practically-minded

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<sup>117</sup> Whether this could really be called choosing a genuinely 'ethical' way of life is another matter.

decision would of course betray Judge William's original emphasis on subjectively motivated, passionately engaged choice of the ethical and would not be a movement out of the aesthetic at all.

If the ethical person cannot teach another what to do, cannot commit a truly ethical action, two questions immediately arise. Firstly, what gives such a person the right to even be called an ethical person? Secondly, how might one become ethical given that no one could teach one how to do so? That is, what, if anything, makes it possible for an individual to be pulled out of the temptation of the numerical in the present age, or (if it is indeed different) out of the aesthetic way of life?

Kierkegaard gives one curious and unfortunately under-explained clue. In a passing comment he states that if a person was to try and lead the process of leveling s/he would automatically escape leveling (*ibid.*, 84). Leveling is thus escapable... but how, given that within leveling 'inwardness' and 'character' are automatically ruled out?<sup>118</sup> Since Kierkegaard does not expand upon this point further we might be forced to make some suppositions. For now, let us suppose that a person is whole-heartedly engaged in self-satisfaction. They live comfortably within the numerical mass that is the public. Such a person decides that there may be an even better way to satisfy their wants than the current widespread practices and makes an attempt to pursue these. This differentiation between oneself and the public might mark the first possibility of leaving the latter. In an age concerned with quantity over quality, where it is thought that a certain amount of *people* make one '*individual*' (*ibid.*, 85), the recognition that

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<sup>118</sup> As Dr. Graham M. Smith has pointed out to me, this example still ultimately shows that it is impossible to *lead* levelling, since the would-be leader simultaneously escapes levelling with his or her attempt to lead it.

one is *qualitatively* different to the rest may be one which if only temporarily brings one out of the quantitative mindset of leveling.

Whether or not the person then goes on to merely re-enter the numerical way of thinking is another question. It may be that the individual simply recognises that complete forfeiture of individuality may be the most aesthetically beneficial thing to do. But the individual was at least brought to a *rupture*. And it is from here that a *real* decision could be made. Having (quite accidentally) escaped leveling, we might presume that the individual also recognises that he or she is capable of making a personal choice, an existential decision. Hence, the restrictions upon inwardness and character which were inherent within levelling are temporarily lifted. The person is at least given insight into the fact that it is possible to be an *individual*, potentially living in a way that sets them apart from the crowd, and thus that an alternative way of life is available.

Thus, whilst Kierkegaard does not think that within the present age an ethical individual can inform another, he does believe that *leveling itself* can be educative. This, presumably, is what allows for individuals to still develop ethically and religiously. What I have described above may be an example of ethical development in the present age. Although I made certain suppositions, I did not have to presuppose that the developing individual had any ethical characteristics. Indeed, I described the movement in aesthetic terms: the individual was self-absorbed in a project of increasing their aesthetic satisfaction (which, if Kierkegaard is correct, will inevitably bring the aesthete to a rupture anyhow). The insight of an alternative existential way

of living was brought about not only despite the individual's interest in aesthetic maximisation, but even due to it.

If this is where the ethical resides in the present age, it is indeed quickly superseded. For Kierkegaard argues that the person in this position, the individual momentarily separated from the crowd, will soon realise that *remaining* apart from the crowd will necessarily entail great hardship. Standing aside from the crowd creates a dichotomy which will quickly be noticed by both parties. Remaining there, Kierkegaard insists, will inexorably entail ostracism. Additionally, the overburdening numerical force of the crowd will soon be constantly bearing down upon this 'single individual'; enviously seeking to eradicate any distinctions he or she might have with an endless string of lampooning.

Kierkegaard explains that such a person *must* have *religious* inwardness to survive this state of affairs and remain a single individual. Some have been sceptical of this solution. The ethical way of life is suddenly rendered useless and religiosity simultaneously replaced as the only possible escape from the problems inherent within the present age. One Kierkegaard scholar terms this religious solution a *deus ex machina* (Conway, 1999, 41), brought in, presumably from nowhere, to clear up any and all of the problems that Kierkegaard's philosophical classifications might have otherwise created. It certainly seems as if the ethical recedes to a vanishing point as Kierkegaard's writings develop into his late authorship. But Kierkegaard does at least give reasons for his claims. I have tried to show why Kierkegaard believed that the ethical way of life (both the 'first' and the 'second' ethics) no longer helps the individuals of the present age. But as stated before, this claim does not entail that one

cannot *act* ethically,<sup>119</sup> only that ethical action will not have the intended effect and would perhaps even be misinterpreted as aesthetic action.

What all of this entails, and whether Kierkegaard has a political solution to the problems of the present age, will be the focus of the next, concluding section of this chapter.

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<sup>119</sup> Kierkegaard discusses the fact that one of the characters of the original novel under review, Dalund, had lived in both ages and thus allows for a comparison of both ages. In the present age, Dalund is satirical of the present state of affairs, no doubt nostalgic of the way things were before. (TA; 56) But satire, Kierkegaard later tells us, must have an *ethical* basis (TA; 74). That is, Dalund's satire is in fact an ethical criticism of some of the characteristics of the present age.

### 5.3 Concluding remarks

The first thing to note is that the above reading of *Two Ages* questions the charge that Kierkegaard is a mere subjectivist. Kierkegaard's ontological view of the individual is that he or she is necessarily related to his or her external situation (see n.112 above). To inspire ethico-religious action in an individual in the present age requires a fundamentally different activity than in a previous age. The individual who truly wishes to develop his or herself and to help others develop in a similar fashion cannot be blind to the fact that the given socio-political setup imposes certain limitations on this project, rendering the activities of some existential life-views altogether useless. Furthermore, contrary to being apolitical, Kierkegaard shows us that developing authentically requires some basic knowledge of the socio-political conditions of the age.

A second result of this reading is that it draws links between Kierkegaard's earlier 'pseudonymous' literature, which is most typically thought of as being 'apolitical', and the later, signed works. Judge William, for example, notes both that his age was depressed (E/O II, 23 and 189) and that the predominant culture of the times was an aesthetic one (E/O II, 226). As we saw above, in his review of *Only a Fiddler*, Kierkegaard's 'reviewer' had claimed that Andersen's aesthete-like personality (his: 'lyric self-absorption'; 'merely phenomenological personality'; and his 'personality [which was] wrapped up in... a web of arbitrary moods' (EPW, 70, 82, and 70



respectively)) was in large part a result of the tumultuous political times. Kierkegaard's earlier writings that highlighted the respective shortcomings of the aesthetic and the ethical way of life could therefore be seen as a kind of social critique. In his pseudonymous literature, Kierkegaard delineates various existentially impoverished ways of life and shows how they are partly the products of their socio-political surroundings. Kierkegaard frequently diagnoses the pseudonyms' existential failings as being at least partially caused by external circumstances. But Kierkegaard also typically uses the same writings to give the reader clues about how they could maintain spiritual development even in unfavourable situations.

Another result of the above reading is that it offers a response to the claim that Kierkegaard neglected the ethical way of life in his later writings. According to the reading we have just pursued, the ethical way of life is radically altered in the present age. In other ages, one could quite comfortably exist as an ethical individual, and could inspire ethico-religious activity simply by displaying one's distinctive ethical passion and zeal. In the present age, staying in the ethical realm brings with it such pressures that one must either buckle and return to the 'aesthetic' realm of the crowd, or (and for Kierkegaard this now necessarily requires religious strength) choose to remain a single individual. That the ethical way of life had become a vanishing point in Kierkegaard's late authorship has previously been justified by claiming that Kierkegaard became increasingly religious in the later part of his life. But Kierkegaard later published *Works of Love* which was an exercise in portraying what a system of 'second ethics' would look like in an ideal age. In this ideal state, a state

of affairs where political entities respect the limits appropriate to them,<sup>120</sup> the ethical once more has a central role in uniting people in sociability. I believe that ethical activity is central to Kierkegaard's thought. The fact that ethical activity wanes in the present age is, to my mind, surely one of the greatest problems of the present age. The ethical way of life becoming increasingly ineffective has a momentous impact on genuine sociability (as we shall see in more depth in chapter seven below). Thus I have argued against the reading that Kierkegaard placed less importance on the ethical way of life in his later writings, insisting instead that the inability to remain in the ethical sphere of life can in fact be seen as evidence that external institutions can shape the existential spheres, and hinder existential development in various ways. That the existential aspects of the individual can be threatened by social trends and government actions is also shown by the fact that the various characteristics of Kierkegaard's 'present age' inadvertently favoured an aesthetic way of life (whilst simultaneously rendering the alternatives difficult to achieve, or altogether ineffectual).

I mentioned above that when a state advocates policies that subsidise the aesthetic, and tax the religious way of life this violates two fundamental maxims of contemporary liberal democracy thought: 1) that the state ought to be neutral towards individual's attempts at the good life and 2) that the state ought not to interfere with the individual's freedom to pursue religious interests. Our reading of Kierkegaard would appear to open up a contemporary existential as well as liberal basis for criticising and evaluating certain policies. I think that this is a viable project and I am

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<sup>120</sup> I adopt the term 'genuine politics' from Bruce Kirmmse's work (Kirmmse, 1990b; 272) and I shall use the term from here on as a synonym for the rather more cumbersome phrase: 'adhering to Kierkegaard's theory of the political'. (As I understand it, Kirmmse also uses the term to refer to a similar notion as this.)

sympathetic to the idea that when governmental decisions are mapped up, attention to how they might affect the *existential* development of the people they are intended could be taken into consideration. A policy that in some way existentially impoverishes the individual, especially if the policy is interested in improving the lives of citizens, may be counter-productive. But the activity of evaluating every policy decision as to whether or not it may have harmful existential effects is a task that Kierkegaard does not engage in.

We can separate two responses to illegitimate and existentially impoverishing policies. Firstly, we could claim that the latter either 1) violate state neutrality; 2) illegitimately interfere with the individual's right to pursue the good life; 3) and/or does unnecessary harm (perhaps more harm than good) to the well-being of some citizens (or the citizenry as a whole). Any or all of these claims could be important reasons for monitoring the existential effects that policies have with regards to the single individual. Such concerns also might permit us to reject certain policies and perhaps even condone others. If such concerns are justified from this liberal position, however, they would be made from the standpoint of securing civil liberties and welfare. Kierkegaard does not engage in this task. Kierkegaard also does not necessarily value civil liberties above existential development, as many liberal theorists would otherwise.

Hence, I believe that the second response to existentially impoverishing conditions is the one that Kierkegaard would more readily condone; to not become embroiled in matters of politics but to strive to help each other person develop existentially. The value of this task appears to be greater for Kierkegaard than securing civil liberties.

This is not to say that civil liberties are of no interest to him whatsoever. In fact, it could be argued that respecting Kierkegaard's own separation between existential and civil issues (i.e., his theory of the political) might actually lead to greater civil liberties in the long-run. A truly well-educated and democratic populace might be one which consists of individuals who decide for themselves what things they value. This citizenry would ideally consist of individuals who are not hindered by state enforced notions of religiosity or the good life. If civil liberties are secured by the interaction between an ideal democratic populace and a government(/state) that respects its limitations and purpose, then it may be the case that not politicising existential issues might be the best way of securing existential development as well as civil liberties.

Kierkegaard did not and perhaps would not have ever articulated such arguments. His principal commitment was in highlighting the dangers involved in not respecting a basic theory of the political. If Kierkegaard also described the political, civil, or liberal benefits of adhering to his theory of the political then it might have contradicted his own project of keeping the two separate. Kierkegaard produced existentially upbuilding literature and, on the whole, left it to the politicians to order political affairs. This could be seen as a purposeful adherence to his emphasis on the proper separation between the political and the existential.

But to think that Kierkegaard might have had civic interests in mind might also be somewhat anachronistic. *Two Ages* was written and published prior to the 1848 revolution that changed Denmark from an absolute monarchy to a democratic constitutional monarchy and that expanded the right to vote on all political matters to universal (male) suffrage (Kirmmse 1990, 67-8). What would have been considered

'liberal' in Denmark in the nineteenth century and under an absolute monarchy might be vastly different from what we mean by the word 'liberal' today.<sup>121</sup>

All this is to say that contemporary political readings of Kierkegaard's works are certainly viable. Using Kierkegaard's works as a starting point for the pursuit of securing civil liberties is also a feasible endeavour. Yet I would claim that such scholarship should only be termed 'Kierkegaardian' if by 'Kierkegaardian' we merely mean *inspired* by some of the political insights of Kierkegaard's works. I argue that a faithful 'Kierkegaardian' theory of the political must be one that affords only secondary importance to the pursuit of securing civil liberties; and always primary importance to existential commitments.

This is not to say that Kierkegaard's theory of the political does not include discussions about political entities. On the contrary, the text examined in the next chapter will help show that Kierkegaard does believe that a fight for a (negative) political change can be justified on existentially motivated grounds. Explaining when such a situation is justified will also highlight one more nuance of Kierkegaard's theory of the political – that of justifying existentially motivated political activism. Additionally, an analysis of this work will forcefully bring into question the criticism levelled by some contemporary scholars that Kierkegaard's theory of the political is ultimately 'impotent' with regards to real-world change. The next chapter, on the contrary, offers a theoretical argument for when it is legitimate to fight against

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<sup>121</sup> The separation of church and state which was arguably Kierkegaard's only political contribution to the problems of his times was still seen by most of his 'liberal' contemporaries as 'radical' (Kirmmse, 1992; 175). So radical was Kierkegaard's proposal that Church and State be separated, coupled with his 'Attacks against Christendom' which railed against a condition that did not separate the two, that one contemporary concluded that Kierkegaard must have been 'secretly in league with the atheists' (Malik, 1997; 98, n.70. See also p.126).

unjustified and existentially impoverishing policies. This is an additional aspect of Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political.

## CHAPTER SIX:

### Kierkegaard and Political Reform.

#### Introduction.

Thus far this thesis has looked at works that span Kierkegaard's entire authorship. The general account of Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political, it has hopefully been shown, is one where Kierkegaard maintains some basic theoretical tenets. One such theoretical commitment is the ontological belief that some concepts are logically distinct from each other. Such is the case between political entities and non-political ones. Politics properly deals with the temporal aspect of human beings *en masse* and uses means that are appropriate to that task. Spirit, on the other hand, is linked with the existential aspects of the single individual. Confusing the means of these logically distinct entities can cause serious existential impoverishment (as well as political turmoil). Consequently, we have seen Kierkegaard opposing to resorting to political reform to cure what he perceives to be a spiritual problem.

Nevertheless, I have sought to remind the reader that this is not the complete account of Kierkegaard's theory of the political. As I have intimated at, Kierkegaard did advocate a change in the political structure of Denmark as an aid to his task of

spiritual reformation. At first glance it might appear as though Kierkegaard's disestablishmentarianism must contradict the core tenets of his existential theory of the political. Indeed, some Kierkegaard scholars have argued that Kierkegaard's attacks on the Danish state/church marriage is an aberration to his earlier thought. Hence, scholars have concluded that Kierkegaard's 'church attack' literature is an exception to an otherwise unified authorship.<sup>122</sup>

I shall offer an alternative interpretation of these late writings. In fact, I shall argue that Kierkegaard's call for political change is completely compatible with the existential theory of the political that has been elucidated in the previous chapters. Far from being an aberration to the rest of the authorship then, I will argue that Kierkegaard's 'attack' literature keeps his core philosophical tenets at the fore – philosophical commitments that span the entire authorship. Kierkegaard does not alter or contradict any of these key commitments during his church attack – not even his beliefs regarding the role that political reform has with regards to prompting spiritual laxity.

In short, I shall argue that Kierkegaard's 'church attack' is contrary to all appearances neither a primarily political movement nor a justification for a positive policy change. Nor does Kierkegaard seek to secure a civic freedom or an increase in our temporal welfare. I shall argue that Kierkegaard's church attack is rather an example of a negative policy change that is primarily justified on spiritual and existential grounds.

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<sup>122</sup> See notes 124-6 below for a discussion of this literature.



Kierkegaard still recognised that advocating a political reform of any kind might have negative consequences with regards to the interpretation of his existentialism. That is, Kierkegaard understood that his contemporaries (and his future interpreters) might falsely take his disestablishmentarianism as proof that his existentialist commitments imply a positive political programme. In response to this tempting reading, however, I shall argue that a proper analysis of Kierkegaard's church attack and the justifications he gave for this engagement shows that one can at best only deduce a negative political programme from Kierkegaard's existentialist thought.

The first sub-section of this chapter will therefore outline and examine Kierkegaard's attack on established Christendom (6.1). In outlining Kierkegaard's attack against the established Church I will also attempt to show that the attack is compatible with the preceding authorship. I will emphasise this point by arguing that Kierkegaard's 'political' reform is actually existentially motivated (6.2). Finally, I shall work out the implications that Kierkegaard's 'church attack' has for his theory of the political (6.3). I conclude that the former is an additional nuance of rather than contradiction to the latter. This new facet of Kierkegaard's theory of the political has interesting ramifications of its own. This most finalised expression of Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political opens up the possibility of combatting existentially damaging policies (and social trends). Hence, Kierkegaard's existential and political commitments are not as quietist as has often been thought. Indeed, Kierkegaard's theory of the political allows for responses and revisions to real-world policies.

## 6.1 Kierkegaard's 'attack' on established Christendom: in-line with the authorship

As has been argued throughout this thesis, Kierkegaard's primary interest is in the spiritual and existential development of the single individual. In the previous chapter we saw that political entities (accidentally or not) sometimes trespass their legitimate scope and (negatively) affect the existential welfare of their citizens. The question we might now ask is: could the damage to spiritual development that political entities inadvertently cause give us sufficient justification for rejecting or revising some of their policies? I believe that Kierkegaard highlights the conditions for answering this question affirmatively. These qualifications highlight Kierkegaard's advocacy of the separation of church and state - a political suggestion which was perceived as 'radical' (Kirmmse, 1992, 175) in his own times.

Kierkegaard's 'attack' of the state-church marriage, and the latter's resulting phenomenon of 'Christendom', was both prolonged and vehement. It also appears to contradict some of the tenets that he had previously defended. In *An Open Letter*, for example, (a text examined in section 3.1 above) we saw that Andreas Gottlob Rudelbach had attempted to use Kierkegaard's works as aid in bringing about an external change. Kierkegaard responded with a challenge for any reader to find in his authorship:

[...] a single proposal for external change, or the slightest suggestion of such a proposal, or even anything that in the remotest way [...] could resemble an intimation of such a proposal or of a belief that the problem [of the emancipation of the individual] is lodged in externalities, that external change is what is needed, that external change is what will help us (COR, 53).<sup>123</sup>

Kierkegaard's call for political change is so different from statements found in the rest of his authorship that some have found it difficult to see how the former could be consistent with the latter. Some have argued that the 'church attack' is evidence that Kierkegaard lost his mental faculties,<sup>124</sup> whilst others have suggested that the attack ought to be perceived of as akin to the pseudonymously authored works (despite the fact that Kierkegaard signed each journal piece in his own name).<sup>125</sup> Even contemporary Kierkegaard scholars who have closely examined Kierkegaard's authorship differ in opinion as to whether Kierkegaard's church attack was in line with, or a deviation from, the rest of his thought.<sup>126</sup> Yet I believe that a careful inspection of at least some aspects of the late authorship shows that it is in line with the former. Hence, I shall ally myself with scholars who believe the authorship to be consistent, and shall attempt to offer additional support for this interpretation.

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<sup>123</sup> In fact, even during his 'attack', Kierkegaard attempts to clarify that he is not a 'reformer' (TM, 40) and not in any way concerned with 'popular movements' or 'civic disturbance' (*ibidi.*, 76-77).

<sup>124</sup> Timothy Darlymple presents, and consequently refutes, many of the charges made against Kierkegaard's sanity; from Kierkegaard's contemporaries to ours (2009, 166-67). The reaction of Kierkegaard's contemporaries goes some way to attesting how 'radical' Kierkegaard's attack was perceived. For other contemporaries that concluded Kierkegaard must have lost his mind, see also: Kirmmse (1998b; 130).

<sup>125</sup> Once more, Darlymple gives a good assessment of this position (Darlymple, 2009, 166-67).

<sup>126</sup> Contemporary scholars that hold Kierkegaard's later political position to be in rupture of his earlier position include: N. H. Sørensen (1956); and O. Bertelsen (1999) (both examples cited in Law (2009b, 73)). Those who think that Kierkegaard's attack literature is completely in line with his earlier works include B. Kirmmse (1990b, 4-5, 410); D. Law (2009b, 84, 97); M. L. Taylor (2009, 200); and N. Thulstrup (Thulstrup, N., & Thulstrup, M., M., 1984, 258-59). David Law assesses some of the literature for and against these views in his defence of the consistency of Kierkegaard's 'attack' literature with the earlier writings (Law, 2009b, 73-75).

Though Kierkegaard's attack itself was initiated by the sermon H. L. Martensen gave in honour of the then recent passing of Bishop Mynster, what really prompted the attack appears to be a change in Kierkegaard's views. Prior to his attack, Kierkegaard had still wished to refrain from openly engaging in external, political action. In order to help clear up some of the spiritual ailments of his time Kierkegaard had asked, however, that a concession be made by Bishop Mynster (or another leading religious figure) that the latter's preaching was a weakened version of the true demands of New Testament Christianity.<sup>127</sup> Kierkegaard explains that when he realised that no such concession would be made he initiated his church attack. Note, though, that as Kierkegaard also openly admits, his decision to use his authorship as a means of fighting for political change was completely in-line with and even necessitated by his primary interest in aiding individuals towards existential development (TM, 15).<sup>128</sup>

As long as individuals recognised that Denmark's established teaching of Christianity, which was being represented as 'true Christianity', was in some respects different from the Christianity of the New Testament, Kierkegaard intimates that he would have silently endured the former. This admission was necessary, Kierkegaard argues, for his authorship to continue its task of provoking spiritual deepening in his readers. As long as his authorial task could continue unperturbed Kierkegaard would not have advocated political reform. Kierkegaard writes as such in his twentieth article for the journal 'Faedrelandet' (May 16, 1855):

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<sup>127</sup> For journal entries that relate to this point, see: JP III, 2971, 3335, 3617; JP IV, 4643.

<sup>128</sup> Indeed, this statement has provided the justification for some contemporary Kierkegaard scholars, such as Robert Perkins, to emphasise the unity of Kierkegaard's late and early authorship (Perkins, 2009; 307).

My earlier thought was: if the establishment can be defended at all, this is the only way, namely, by pronouncing a judgment upon it [...] in the sense that Christianity would not be forgiveness merely for what is past, but by grace would be a sort of dispensation from following Christ in the proper sense and from the effort properly connected with being a Christian. In that way truth would [read also: could] enter into the establishment after all. (*ibid.*, 69)

According to this rather compact statement, Kierkegaard would have remained at peace with the established Christian State so long as it openly proclaimed that it was a less demanding version of New Testament Christianity. Even with the spiritual deficiencies that Kierkegaard believed to have been harboured within it, Kierkegaard felt that if the Danish establishment only acknowledged that it practised a weaker version of New Testament Christianity individuals could still call upon God's grace and forgiveness for practising this concessionary Christianity. When Bishop Mynster had refrained from making any such confession, Kierkegaard attempted to highlight the differences between the New Testament and Danish established Christianity with the book *Practice in Christianity*, pseudonymously authored by 'Anti-Climacus'. In this work, Kierkegaard/Anti-Climacus asks the reader to honestly accept that there are vast differences between Denmark's established state Christianity and the preaching of Jesus Christ.

But Kierkegaard's view apparently changed. Kierkegaard came to believe that one could no longer sincerely ask for God's grace to solve a problem which was caused by an abuse of God's grace (*ibid.*, 70). Kierkegaard even argued that if *Practice in Christianity* was to be republished again the pseudonym should be dropped and the work be signed in his own name (*ibid.*, 69). Given that *Practice in Christianity* was nearing a second edition, this was not a distant prospect.

This event could also be seen as a switch between Kierkegaard's earlier, *indirect* method at highlighting the differences between established and New Testament Christianity, and his later, *direct* method. It is precisely this change in strategy that some Kierkegaard scholars see as the link between the earlier pseudonymous literature, and the later 'attack' on Christendom (see for example: Law (2009b, 77); Perkins (2009, 307)). For whilst Kierkegaard's *methodological* approach shifts, his *theoretical* commitments remain the same in both parts of the authorship.

David Law convincingly pursues this argument. Law argues that Kierkegaard's 'attack' is in line with his earlier thought but represents a shift from an indirect to a direct solution to political-spiritual problems. In fact, Law argues that this shift highlights how Kierkegaard's methodology shifts in response to changes in socio-political circumstances and to (perhaps subsequent) differing existential problems. Law makes two slightly different claims about the existential justifications for Kierkegaard's attack, one addressing why the attack had not happened sooner, and then one explaining why it came at the time it did. Prior to the direct attack, Law states that:

[...] Kierkegaard does not see the need of a reform of the Church [in his earlier writings], because this would address only unessential externalities and distract from the real issue, namely the individual's inward appropriation of Christianity. (Law, 2009b, 82)

Kierkegaard had frequently sought to avoid being interpreted as one who was interested in external affairs. A misinterpretation of his true, primary interest in inward reform risked causing his contemporaries and future readers to miss the point of his authorship, or even worse, to attempt to politically implement his existential thought. The latter would only engender the problems caused by disastrously mixing the political and the existential and so would undoubtedly result in further existential damage. Yet there reached a point where the risks of Kierkegaard becoming engaged in political affairs outweighed the existential harm that the Danish state-church marriage was causing by promulgating a false conception of religiosity. At this point, Kierkegaard's attack became the most pertinent response to existential problems. Despite this, Kierkegaard still maintained a minimalist attitude towards external change even *during* his attack, since he did not want it to '[...] be absorbed into the status quo' (*ibid.*, 93) of political (over)activism. This would only risk masking its true, existential purpose and hence put its effectiveness at jeopardy.

In his earlier authorship, Kierkegaard had thought that attempts at politically implemented spiritual reform would only bring about more turmoil than good. Yet it was left an open question as to whether this viewpoint was determined by the particular socio-political situation that it was articulated in or whether it was a theoretical commitment that Kierkegaard wished to always endorse. It might be stipulated that Kierkegaard's earlier protestations of political quietism were defended on the basis that political intervention might have had unwanted and perhaps counter-productive existential consequences given the empirical conditions of that specific time and place. If this is the case, an argument for external change may be permitted under extreme circumstances and if Kierkegaard's existential interests warranted it.

Simply put, the negative existential implications for permitting a harmful state of affairs to continue to exist might eventually become greater than the potential existential harm of having Kierkegaard advocate a policy change. Under this reading, such considerations might have finally warranted Kierkegaard in advocating political reform.

Nevertheless, this reading is still surely at odds with Kierkegaard's earlier position. For in *Two Ages*, Kierkegaard had proclaimed that there was nothing politically that could be done to solve the existential problems of the 'Present Age'. The work concluded with a proclamation of political quietism and the hope that the 'Present Age' will at least educate some of its populace religiously. Kierkegaard, we noted, thought this book to have been a completely neutral evaluation of his age.

Since Kierkegaard had explicitly admitted having changed his mind about the defensibility of the established State Church, might he have also changed his mind about the permissibility of advocating political reform? Or was, perhaps, Kierkegaard's cry for political change not a political manoeuvre at all, but rather another kind of existentially motivated action? Is the latter activity compatible with or contradictory to Kierkegaard's authorial task of spiritual deepening? Addressing such questions will be the goal of the next sub-section.



## 6.2 Kierkegaard's 'attack' – political or existential?

Kierkegaard's fight for the separation of the Church and State has been seen as an undoubtedly political endeavour. Robert Perkins has argued that: 'Only in the newspaper articles and *The Moment* did Kierkegaard ever make demands for political change in a political way' (Perkins, 2009, 316). Earlier on in his examination of Kierkegaard's 'Instant Writings', Perkins writes that:

[... Kierkegaard's] involvement in issues involving the sanctity and inviolability of the individual, which began in his critique of aestheticism in *Either/Or*, has led him via his critique of Christendom and its political establishment to a strong affirmation of the Enlightenment concept of religious liberty! (*ibid.*, 312)

Kierkegaard is said to be included in the company of Aristotle, Locke, Rousseau, Hegel, the Constitution of the United States, and the First Amendment in critiquing the marriage of Church and State on the grounds that it violates the sanctity of the individual. Perkins does conclude, however, that he:

would not go so far as to suggest that Kierkegaard's final political position is pragmatic or progressive, for those political philosophies are far too optimistic and secular in their assumptions about the capacity of the state and the possibility of human improvement apart from the religious.

Religious depth as set forth in the writings signed by himself is then, for Kierkegaard, the only authentic basis for political and social change (*ibid.*, 316).

This last line is very important, but also appears strikingly at odds with what Perkins had previously stated. For though Kierkegaard and the 'Enlightenment concept of religious liberty' come to the same conclusions about the separation of Church and State, and are even possibly in agreement about the sanctity of the individual, surely they come to these conclusions by radically different methods? The Enlightenment concept of religious liberty, much like the contemporary, liberal idea of it, is derived from a 'disinterested' point of view where existential concerns are factored out as mere contingencies.

So though Kierkegaard comes to the conclusion that the Church and State ought to be separated, a conclusion which many Enlightenment and modern thinkers alike have also deduced, it is important to note that Kierkegaard does so for very different reasons to the former. Whereas most political theorists arrive at the conclusion from considerations of how the religious side might encroach upon the political, Kierkegaard's conclusions are drawn from the opposite direction.<sup>129</sup> Kierkegaard believes that the church and state ought to be separated to prevent the political from encroaching upon the religious. Unlike Enlightenment theorists then, Kierkegaard's primary interest is not in securing the political rights of individuals or recommending political changes to maximise liberty. Kierkegaard's political interest, I maintain, is secondary to and derivative from his primary existential commitments. Hence,

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<sup>129</sup> Of course, there may be exceptions to this rule. Our examination of 'political theology' pursued in section '1.2' above considers some possible exceptions - John Locke, for example.

Kierkegaard's political interest lies in preserving individual's existential efforts at living and developing in a way which is suitable to each person. If Kierkegaard supports political change, it is only in the removal of political obstructions and hindrances to spiritual progression: and even then, only when political activism is a last resort.

I think that Perkins is correct to say that for Kierkegaard 'religious depth' is the sole 'authentic' basis for political change. But this also clearly sets Kierkegaard apart from the Enlightenment and the contemporary understanding of the separation of Church and State; both of which largely give secular, rational justifications for their arguments. 'Religious depth' is, for Kierkegaard, an existential qualification which could entail a description of the degree to which one religiously loves others; or the force of the subjective relation, and interpersonal correspondence one has with one's religion/deity. If Perkins is correct, then according to Kierkegaard this existential qualification would be the only 'authentic' ground for political change.

Given his insight into Kierkegaard's existential basis for political change, I take it that when Perkins says that Kierkegaard sought 'political change in a political way', he must mean that Kierkegaard finally resorted to fighting for a political change by directly involving himself with the political system.<sup>130</sup> That Kierkegaard undertook this political change for a primarily existential (rather than, say, civic) reason is a point that perhaps Perkins' first quote does not adequately express (but which Perkins does make sure to emphasise elsewhere). Where Kierkegaard had previously

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<sup>130</sup> Kierkegaard explicitly justified his use of a popular, liberal journal (which he otherwise personally disliked) on the grounds that it allowed for a more immediate and widespread dispersion of his views (TM; 62-63, 68). Kierkegaard's change in focus, from 'that single individual' to a widespread populace, and his change of medium, from books to journal articles, might be seen as an example of him acting 'politically' – i.e., prioritising the numerical appeal of those works.

attempted purely existential ways of bringing about change, such as using his authorship to highlight the gap between Christendom and New Testament Christianity, he later fought for a change in the political setup of Denmark. We must still bear in mind, however, that Kierkegaard sought for 'political change (in a political way)' only because a political entity was causing a negative effect on existential development; one that Kierkegaard's authorship alone could not address. Thus, it is more accurate to say that Kierkegaard came to seek *existential* change in an existentially motivated political - rather than purely authorial - way. Kierkegaard does not act here *solely* for the sake of political improvement.

The type of existential problems that Christendom was causing is given a detailed analysis in Perkins' article. By falsely giving 'religious' sanction to purely aesthetic phenomenon such as comfortable living, the Danish People's Church created the illusion that many were living religiously when they were in fact only enjoying aesthetic existences. The illusion was apparently so deep and widespread that Kierkegaard's authorial attempts at highlighting the differences between true Christianity and that found in Christendom had not been sufficient to break it. In fact, aestheticism that did not even recognise itself as such was so widespread that Kierkegaard feared that his entire authorship (the attack literature included!) was being read with merely aesthetic interest. Hence, Kierkegaard's attempt at showing the reader that they were existentially misguided merely provoked further aesthetic indulgence (*ibid.*, 92, 260, 313). Only a direct attack on the political system itself might allow some individuals to see they are actually living in an existentially impoverished mode – irrespective of the fact that the Danish state's religious leaders may sanction that way of life as representative of New Testament Christianity - the

highest degree of spirituality that Kierkegaard thought a human could exemplify (see JP I, 46; JP IV, 4333, Walsh, 1994, 226; cf., JP III, 3102, 3681).

As we noted in the previous chapter, Kierkegaard is not primarily worried about aestheticism being the most *widespread* way of life. We can imagine an age where aestheticism was the most commonly found way of life. If individuals had thoughtfully come to the conclusion that they wished to live aesthetically, though the choice to live otherwise was a genuinely unhindered availability, we can only conclude that Kierkegaard would have much less concern with political issues. What made Denmark's widespread aestheticism different, however, was that it was fostered (intentionally or not) by government policies.

Even after the revolution of 1848, and the constitution of 1849, the state and church were socially and politically tied. Priests' sermons, for example, had to follow a rigid set of instructions that accorded with the *Church Ritual [for Denmark and Norway, 1685]* as well as with *Danish Law* (Thulstrup, N., & Thulstrup, M., M., 1984, 89). Sermons had to be an interpretation of a set theme of the day in accordance with the *Alter Book* (of 1688), and even then a priest was not allowed to read from a previously prepared, hand-written version of it (*ibid.*). Personal emotions were not allowed to be included, nor political viewpoints and, on the contrary, priests were told to '[...] restrict [themselves] to urging the congregation to be obedient to the king, to his laws and his commands' (*ibid.*).

Another widespread practice that became a central aspect of Kierkegaard's attack on Christendom was forced baptism. As Niels Thulstrup highlights, the fourth article of

the Augsburg Confession, as well as the Danish Law (2-5-6), insists on infant baptism; the latter requiring baptism to '[...] be performed within 8 days of the birth of a child' (*ibid.*). Baptism not only incorporated a child into the Christian religion but also simultaneously made one a Danish citizen.<sup>131</sup>

More political freedom was given to other religions after the 1848 revolution. Socially speaking, however, the old ways were still frequently practised. Thus Thulstrup finds, for example, that '[a] certificate of Confirmation was often a presupposition for employment, just as it was also a precondition for lawful paternity' (*ibid.*, 91). On festal occasions also, '[...] the liberty of the citizens was seriously abridged' (*ibid.*, 90) with strict regulations regarding the practice of business, amusement, and forming assemblies, practices that continued even after the revolution.

On paper, the 1848 revolution gave more freedom of religious practice. But it has been convincingly argued the revolution in fact only made the ties between church and state stronger. Before the revolution, for example, the state church was simply called 'the Danish State Church' [*den Danske Statskirke*]. After the 1848 revolution the name was altered to 'the Danish People's Church' [*den Danske Folkekirke*] (as it is still called today). Despite the name-change, however, there was little difference in the way the new church operated (Kirmmse, 2001b, xvii). As Bruce Kirmmse convincingly argues, the revolution only falsely provided the post-1848 state-church marriage with 'democratic' legitimacy (*ibid.*). Prior to this, the officially religious practices of the state had sanctioned '[...] Pietism and theological rationalism [that] had been upper-class movements, and by and large [had] not had much effect on the

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<sup>131</sup> Special citizenry statuses were given to some minority groups, Christian and non-Christian alike. These include the Reformed Christians, Catholics, and Jews.

common people' (Bukdahl, 2001, 20). In fact, the unofficial religious sects that the 'common man' followed were often in conflict with the official religion. Kirmmse describes the situation as such:

Not infrequently the common people lived in an adversarial relation to the official church. They had their own Christianity: their own preachers, often arrested; their own prayer books and hymnals, often banned; their own religious assemblies, often broken up by the police. They could protest against the religious tyranny of the state church in the name of true Christianity and of "the people." But now that Denmark had become a democratic country, now that the people legally owned the state and the government, now that the church had become the People's Church (though with no change in personnel and little in policy) — in whose name now could the people protest the religious tyranny (and for Kierkegaard, the spiritless mediocrity) of the established church? (Kirmmse, 2001b, xvii)

After the 1848 revolution, the state and church ties were still as strong as they were before. Danish infants would still 'become Christians' in conjunction with becoming Danish citizens by the time they were nine days old. Kierkegaard eventually saw this as a cause for concern. The widespread idea that an individual could be assumed to have been initiated into the Christian way of life for having fulfilled a legal requirement at the age of nine days old was both erroneous and dangerous.

The practice of infant baptism was erroneous in that it neglected to emphasise the personal, thoughtful and subjective commitment that a genuine initiation into Christianity (but religion more generally) must entail, but that an infant obviously lacks. Whilst many of his comments on infant baptism are too mocking to be very informative (i.e., TM, 165, 243, 336; JP I, 602; for more informative comments, see:

JP III, 2630; JP IV, 4344), Kierkegaard does seriously elaborate his position on it in two places in *The Moment* articles. In the first, Kierkegaard explains that 'every reasonable person, [would have to agree] that not until one has reached maturity and the age of discretion does one receive permission to decide what religion one shall have' (TM, 230). Though Kierkegaard is talking of the specifically Christian practice of [infant] baptism, he opens his discussion up to religion as a whole. From it, we clearly see that Kierkegaard's qualifications for the religious way of life are maturity, and the ability to choose one's religion in a careful and informed manner. As he returns to the practice of infant baptism, Kierkegaard concludes that to have a religion from this external practice '[...] is, spiritually speaking, a comic pitifulness' (*ibid.*). To clarify: Kierkegaard is only critiquing the practice of *infant* baptism, not baptism as a whole. Kierkegaard would not have a problem with the practice of baptism as an initiation into the religion of Christianity undertaken by a mature person who has a genuinely informed idea of what Christianity entails.

A little later Kierkegaard discusses confirmation, but once again elucidates his position on religion as a whole. Kierkegaard argues that '[...] confirmation is far more extreme nonsense than infant Baptism simply because confirmation claims to supply what was lacking in infant Baptism: an actual personality [...]' (*ibid.*, 244). Once again, Kierkegaard is not critical of confirmation *per se*, but of confirmation taking place at the (in his opinion, still too young) age of fifteen (*ibid.*, 243), and as a ceremony which is all but necessary if one wants to do well in the world.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Kierkegaard believes that the person should be confirmed at the age of twenty-five (JP I, 494). This quote in particular is used as evidence of a basic anthropological principle; that for Kierkegaard obtaining a certain level of psychological-physical development is a necessary requirement for any genuine attempt at entering the religious way of life. Recall the description of Kierkegaard's anthropology that was discussed above (in section 3.3.1).



Since church and state were so closely related, Danish citizens could mistakenly think themselves as being religious for having been born, having undertaking some almost compulsory ceremonies and frequenting church, and for being a good citizen and obeying the law. This notion of religiosity lacks the stringent, inward demands that Kierkegaard believes to be a necessary aspect of spirituality, and hence of all genuinely religious endeavours in general (see: 3.3 above). Through Denmark's state church marriage (ungenuine) religion became intermingled with worldly, temporal necessity and gain. True religiosity for Kierkegaard is found by placing faith in something that lies beyond the finite, beyond worldly gain, and that is not necessitated by state sanctioned practices.<sup>133</sup> The genuine criteria for being religious (inward appropriation and subjective choice) are ignored in a socio-political situation where the dominant ideology states that following state-sanctioned practices alone is a sufficient condition of religiosity.

Kierkegaard thought that this scenario even eroded away at the genuine existential requirements of religiosity and spirituality. In a world where aesthetic enjoyment and easy living are rewarded to those who conform to the state-church idea of religiosity, ethical and religious laxity is subsidised and hence becomes prevalent. Indeed, echoing the characteristic deficiencies of the 'present age' (examined in the previous chapter), Kierkegaard once more calls '[...] the defect of the age... lack of character' (*ibid.*, 93. See also: *ibid.*, 162). 'Character' is precisely that criteria needed for a genuine confirmation of the religious way of life. Thus, Kierkegaard claims that '[...] people in our day are not even in what I would call the condition of religion but are

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<sup>133</sup> Recall Kierkegaard's description of 'second ethics' in section 5.2.1 above.

strangers too, unfamiliar with, the kind of passion that every religion must require, without which one cannot have any religion at all' (*ibid.*, 208).<sup>134</sup>

It is surprising to see how Kierkegaard still attempts to put off political action as much as possible even at this most desperate point in his authorship. Instead, Kierkegaard limits himself to the task of saying 'what must be said' and leaving it to the individual to choose whether they continue to endorse Christendom (the state-church marriage) or not (*ibid.*, 73). In other words, part of Kierkegaard's task at the beginning of the attack literature is still in modestly proclaiming the difference between state-church and New Testament Christianity; and the difference between ungenune religion and authentic, existentially formative religion.

But Kierkegaard oscillates between this modest position and one where political action appears as not only acceptable but necessary. This is because Kierkegaard came to see his authorship as an increasingly less potent tool for solving the existential laxity that the age was nurturing. Kierkegaard laments the fact that an aesthetic attitude to life had become so ubiquitous that his own delineations of this

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<sup>134</sup> Note that this is one instance where Kierkegaard opens his discussion to include religiosity in general. In another place, Kierkegaard pushes this point even further by despairingly proclaiming that the age '[...] is not even in the condition of being able to have religion' (TM; 259). I think that this is surely going too far. The idea that the age cannot possibly have religion not only contradicts Kierkegaard's basic theoretical commitment to the idea that any person can become spirit, but it even comes into contradiction with other comments in these writings, e.g., that Judaism is the only religion genuinely preached in his contemporary situation (TM; 213). Needless to say, if Judaism is genuinely being practised then religion (of some sort at least) exists. Perhaps Kierkegaard means that only 'true Christianity', with its emphasis on grace and forgiveness, cannot exist in that situation? Under this reading, socio-political changes would be necessary for a specific kind of religiosity to appear. Still, I find this expression to be irreconcilable with the anthropological view of the self that was examined above. Furthermore, if Socrates could act religiously despite the paganism at the heart of Athens (and on pain of death) then Kierkegaard has at least failed to justify why a citizen of Christendom could not engage in spiritual development of some sort – even to the degree of practising New Testament Christianity. Perhaps by 'religion', then, Kierkegaard only means 'the religious practice of New Testament Christianity'. Perhaps some religions can exist in such a state of affairs (i.e., Judaism), and even some religious individual's (e.g., genuine Christian's), but not the ongoing practice of (even concessionary) Christianity *as a religion*, by a communion of genuinely interested individuals (rather than, say, as merely separated instances of individuals who follow the Christian way of life).

very phenomenon were listened to with merely aesthetic interest (*ibid.*, 92, 260, 313) - if listened to at all. Kierkegaard's most detailed elucidation of this comes close to the end of his life. In the manuscript for the tenth issue of *The Moment* (unpublished during his lifetime), he confesses:

[...] I stand surrounded by contemporaries who at most are interested in this matter [his church attack] in the capacity of the public. In a fleeting mood one is perhaps gripped by what I say; in the next moment one judges it esthetically; in the next moment one reads what is written against me; then one is inquisitive about the outcome etc. etc.: in short, one is—the public (*ibid.*, 313).

When all else has failed – when Kierkegaard has attempted to elucidate the existential problems his potential reader might have, and when this communication fails because the proclamation itself is not engaged with in a serious manner - *then* Kierkegaard resorts to political action.

In his Addendum to 'This Must Be Said: So Let It Be Said' (the final publication in an already established, political journal before Kierkegaard began his own with *The Moment* [*Oiblikket*]), Kierkegaard concludes:

Just as carefully as it has been hitherto concealed what my task could become, just as circumspectly as I have remained in impenetrable incognizance—just as decisively shall I now, when the moment has arrived, make it known.

The question about what Christianity is, including in turn the question about the state Church, the people's Church, which they now want to call it, the amalgamation or alliance of Church and state, must be brought to

the most extreme decision. *It cannot and must not go on* as it did year after year under the old bishop (*ibid.*, 75, my emphasis)

This statement alone does not provide grounds for thinking that disestablishment is the only solution. As Kierkegaard's 'attack' literature mounts, however, his inclination for disestablishment increases. Later on, in the second issue of *The Moment*, under the heading 'That the Task Has a Double Direction', Kierkegaard explains that the task of introducing religion back into Christendom is twofold. The first part of the task is in elucidating the difference(s) between genuine religion and the religion of Christendom (*ibid.*, 107). As we have previously seen, this task takes up much of the earlier Kierkegaard's earlier authorship. In Kierkegaard's own words, the first part of the task:

[...] is directed to what can be done to clear up people's concepts, to instruct them, to stir them by means of the ideals, through pathos to bring them into an impassioned state, to rouse them up with the gadfly sting of irony, scorn, sarcasm, etc. etc. (*ibid.*)

This could well describe Kierkegaard's entire authorship, and Kierkegaard is undoubtedly both skilled at and fond of this task. But there is a second part to the task of introducing spirituality and religion back into the specific state of Christendom that Denmark was experiencing at that time. This second aspect of the task, we are told, would not be required at all if the notion that one was genuinely religious '[...] did not hang together with an enormously huge illusion that has a purely external aspect, the

illusion that Christianity and the state have been fused together' (*ibid.*, cf. JP III, 2904).

With regards to this second task, the conceptual clarification of Kierkegaard's entire preceding authorship was not on its own a sufficient condition for re-introducing religiosity to Danish citizens. As Kierkegaard admits:

[...] the work must be done in a different way; the state, after all, has the power to remove it. Thus the second aspect of the task is to work along the lines of getting the state to remove this illusion.

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If I were to compare this task to something, I would say: It resembles the medical treatment of a mentally ill patient. The treatment must be psychological, says the physician, but that does not mean that there may not also be something physical to do (TM, 108).

The task of enabling the religious way of life as an existential possibility, within Christendom at least, is thus twofold. As Jørgen Bukdahl recognises: 'Kierkegaard's task during that decade of great political and social movements was to propose *both a worldly and a religious corrective*' to the Danish state's inadvertent promotion of what Kierkegaard considered to be inauthentic 'ethical' and 'religious' ways of life (Bukdahl, 2001, 106, my emphasis).

Kierkegaard 'diagnoses' the 'physical' problem of his age as the state-church marriage. Yet Kierkegaard is not himself either keen or sufficiently 'trained' in political affairs to take sole responsibility for the second part of this 'dual task' (TM,

60, *passim*). Still, Kierkegaard recognises that he has a personal responsibility to the existential improvement of his fellows (see section 7.4 below), and he therefore assigns himself the task of 'work[ing] along the lines of getting the state to remove' the obstacles to genuine religiousness (*ibid.*, 108).

Kierkegaard mentions disestablishment so directly in only one other part of his 'attack' literature. A little later, though still in the second issue of *The Moment*, Kierkegaard entertains a supposition:

Suppose... that what we understand by being a Christian is a delusion, that this whole machinery of the state Church... [is] an enormous optical illusion that will not be the least help to us in eternity... in that case let us (for eternity's sake!) get rid of it, the sooner the better (*ibid.*, 121).

A few pages later, Kierkegaard states that it is precisely this 'supposition', that the religion of Christendom is illusory and inauthentic, that had been elucidated in his *entire* preceding authorship:

[...] anyone who has followed my entire work as an author is bound to have seen... that it carries the mark... that the whole matter of "Christendom" is a criminal case corresponding to what is usually known as forgery and swindling (*ibid.*, 129).<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> One is also reminded of a section of *The Point of View* poignantly entitled: "'Christendom' is an enormous illusion' (TPV; 41-45).

The terms 'forgery' and 'swindling' are also supplemented with the idea that, in Christendom, what passes for spirituality and religiosity is a 'falsification', a 'fiction, poetry' (*ibid.*). Proclamations of the state-church fostering the illusion of authentic religion are abundant in the ensuing eight articles of *The Moment*. The only conclusion the reader can draw is therefore: 'let us (for eternity's sake!) get rid of [the state-church marriage], the sooner the better'. Even here, it seems as though Kierkegaard's justification of this political change is spiritually-religiously oriented - for he supports disestablishmentarianism, after all, 'for eternity's sake!'

I hope to have shown that in *The Moment* literature, Kierkegaard suggested at least *one* political change – disestablishment. Disestablishment might arguably be the only political change Kierkegaard ever sought; but this would only be a historically contingent fact. For in Kierkegaard's attack literature, he offers a theoretical justification for 'working alongside the state' in bringing about political change as part of an existential attempt to develop spiritual deepening in one's neighbours. (This social dimension of Kierkegaard's existentialism will be the focus of chapter seven below.) In the next, concluding section of this chapter we will briefly assess how Kierkegaard's call for political change relates to the core tenets of his existential theory of the political.

### 6.3 Conclusions of Kierkegaard's 'attack'.

I have sought to argue that Kierkegaard has an existential theory of the political that might justify political change. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard does not seek political change for civic purposes. Throughout his authorship Kierkegaard had evidenced a reserved attitude to political reform. Not only did Kierkegaard avoid it when possible, but he also frequently sought to emphasise that his own comments about the sub-optimal conditions of his time were only part of an attempt at *spiritual* reformation. A change in externals, Kierkegaard had often stated, was not what the times had needed.

I also defended the view that Kierkegaard's entire authorship is directed at the elucidation of existential categories – the 'aesthetic', 'ethical' and 'religious'. Part of authentic, spiritual development will be in relation to one's external environment; whether the latter is ideal for spiritual development or sub-optimal. Kierkegaard was a skilled author, and generally directed his efforts towards guiding the single individual to existential development despite external hindrances. Furthermore, Kierkegaard frequently gave reasons for believing that spiritual reform is more effectively brought about by engaging with existential ideas rather than through political reformation.

All of this is to admit, however, that Kierkegaard's primary interest is existential. Kierkegaard only calls for the more radical method of political change when his



preferred authorial, existential approach to spiritual problems no longer works. In fact, Kierkegaard recognises that one of his contemporaries, Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783-1872), was seeking to separate the church from the state for civic reasons such as religious freedom of expression. In response, Kierkegaard articulated his worry that whilst the political reform might well succeed, its intended effect on spiritual reformation could, nevertheless, only fail (*ibid.*, 207). The external change would be taken as another justification that something 'religious' had (*en masse*) been achieved, and hence, the existential requirements of religion would still be as neglected as they were prior to the purely external, political movement.<sup>136</sup>

Kierkegaard's stance in *The Moment* is arguably the only place in his authorship where he takes partial responsibility for bringing about external, political change. Our analysis of Kierkegaard's 'attack' as well as of his theory of the political more generally has shown that Kierkegaard's theory of policy change is primarily based upon his existential interests. We could forgive the contemporary Kierkegaard scholar for incorrectly believing that Kierkegaard never advocated political change, since Kierkegaard does often condemn it as a legitimate method of solving existential problems. Furthermore, a theory that policy change ought to be grounded in existential development, rather than civic liberties for example, is surely one that is radically at odds with much of the political thought from the Enlightenment period to our own.

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<sup>136</sup> For a similar example, see Kirmmse (Kirmmse, 2001b; xvii - quoted above) where the 'Danish State Church' changed its name to the 'Danish Peoples Church'. Despite the name change, the 'people's' church continued to endorse only the conservative views that the established 'Danish State Church' had preached prior to the political reform.

In fact, it is hard to overstate the radical nature of Kierkegaard's existentially motivated political activism. A prime example of the way that Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political might be radically at odds with an 'Enlightenment' or contemporary notion of political activism could be on the issue of female emancipation. From Kierkegaard's earliest publications to his latest, in both his pseudonymous and his signed authorship, he advises against female emancipation.<sup>137</sup> Kierkegaard recognised that female emancipation would benefit women in terms of civil rights and liberties. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard argued that emancipation would do irreparable *existential* harm to women. Without going into too much detail about this vast and interesting area, Kierkegaard basically argued that female emancipation would (at that time) risk making women into the secular-minded and politically overzealous *men* that were both existentially impoverished as well as the cause of much existentially damaging socio-political activity.<sup>138</sup> Without female emancipation, ironically enough, Kierkegaard believed that women had the best chance of becoming fully authentic, spiritual selves.

Just as the goal of Kierkegaard's political activism is different to those of contemporary notions, so too are Kierkegaard's prescribed means. We have seen that

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<sup>137</sup> See: COR, 54; E/O II, 22, 53, 311-13; EPW, 3, *passim*.; EUD, 143; SLW, 55-56, 124-25; WOL, 138-140; JP IV, 4992; VI, 6904.

<sup>138</sup> This defence is at least the one given in: E/O II, 312-313; COR, 54; JP IV, 4992; and, JP VI, 6904. This view has also been defended by Julia Watkin (Watkin, 1997, pp. 69-82; 2000a, 75), and fits in well with the understanding of Kierkegaard's spiritual prioritarianism and 'concessionary' attitude with regards to securing civil liberties. For alternative views, see Mark, C., Taylor, who calls Kierkegaard's rejection of female emancipation 'unqualified' (Taylor, 1997, 201, n.9). Note that some feminist scholars, like Céline León, have convincingly argued that Kierkegaard's rejection of female emancipation is based on a hidden misogyny that Kierkegaard harbours, and is therefore theoretically unwarranted (León, 2008, 116-130). Whilst I agree with León that many of Kierkegaard's views on the issue of emancipation suffer from an atypical lack of argumentation, thought, and evidence (that might suggest that other non-theoretical, psychological motivations are working behind the scenes), I nevertheless believe that according to the implications of his existential theory of the political Kierkegaard does have some theoretical grounds for prioritising spiritual development over the pursuit of secular liberties in general, and hence with female emancipation in particular. A similar issue with Kierkegaard's prioritisation of seeking 'spiritual' equality over social equality is pursued in an examination of Adorno's well-known critique of Kierkegaard below (section 7.2).

Kierkegaard does not recommend a *positive* policy alteration. We have also seen that Kierkegaard's call for political reform is certainly a little idiosyncratic. Kierkegaard does not rally a group of supporters; does not form a petition; does not protest with a political sit-in, or anything else of the sort. Kierkegaard publishes polemical pieces in a journal that he established for the task. Since not every person has the means or the ability to do this, what might Kierkegaard have to say about the legitimate means to political activism more generally?

We have seen (in chapters three and five above) that Kierkegaard does not advocate the use of political means which appeal to numerical force for spiritual matters. Hence, Kierkegaard would satirise the use of balloting as a means for spiritually motivated political reform. When it comes to activism with regards to spiritual matters, Kierkegaard instead advises each single individual to stand firm to his or her existential interests and commitments. Rather than rallying supporters, existentially fighting for spiritual reform will likely only ostracise the single individual from the majority. Recall also that in chapter five above we saw how being a single individual in 'the present age' would necessarily involve social ostracism, as well as hardship.

Despite the fact that the 'present age' reflects a rather specific type of society, it is important to note that political activism for spiritual reform will nonetheless most likely *always* involve an act of suffering. Such are the legitimate means for which the single individual is equipped in the battle for spiritually motivated political reform. The single individual dares to stand firm in his or her beliefs in direct confrontation to the majority, or to the 'established' way of doing things. It is highly likely that the act of the single individual will offend members of the majority who follow a

comfortable and thoughtless way of life, and that the majority will respond by inflicting mockery and abuse upon the single individual. Being tyrannised for daring to be authentic, or for defending spiritual beliefs, might actually be the existential inspiration for enabling another individual to develop existentially; but there is no guarantee of it. The genuinely spiritual reformer will not be concerned with numbers, however, and so will nevertheless be happy if he or she aids just one other single person in becoming an authentic self.

If this notion of political activism is rather striking, I believe that it is intentionally so. The radical nature of Kierkegaard's existential theory of political activism is not only the direct result of his continual priority of existential commitments to other ones but is also what makes his theory of existential reform so forceful in the first place. Hence, any faithful description or reproduction of Kierkegaard's existential theory of political ought not to understate or distort the radically challenging nature of the original thought.

Kierkegaard's existential activism also shows that existential commitments are essentially reflexive towards external change. Furthermore, we have seen that Kierkegaard's task of developing spiritual development is always articulated in relation to real-world changes. Recall that Kierkegaard had criticized Luther's reform for not being sufficiently informed and safe-guarded against external circumstances. From Luther's reformation, Kierkegaard learned that spiritual reform must take externals into consideration; and this includes the political ramifications that a (spiritual or political) reform might have on the existential development of the typical individual.

Throughout the majority of his authorship Kierkegaard thought that he was able to counter-act the problematic effects that a non-ideal socio-political setup created by directing the single individual towards spiritual development. Whether the single individual then achieved spiritual deepening would be another and separate matter. The important point was that Kierkegaard thought that it was possible to communicate to a single, individual reader, and to guide that reader around any hindering effects that an age might have on his or her spiritual development. In this way, the existentially harmful effects of an age could be worked around and effectively nullified.

Yet Kierkegaard believed that Denmark's enforcement of Lutheranism as the established religion and the social practices and ideological climate it produced was too great an obstacle to his previous task of spiritual deepening. Kierkegaard's views most likely changed when his call for a concession to be made by someone from within the established Lutheran Church went unanswered. In fact, Kierkegaard gave up all hope of receiving an admission from a high-ranking official within Denmark's established Lutheranism that the latter lowered the spiritual demands of the New Testament. The only way for Kierkegaard to continue his task of spiritual deepening was to fight for the removal of the external obstacle to his cause, even if this risked being mistakenly took for an author primarily interested in securing civil liberties.

Hence, I have hoped to have shown not only that Kierkegaard existentialism is constantly reflexive towards external change, but that external alterations are even sometimes justified given Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political. This

provides a response to some of the contemporary response to Kierkegaard's political thought that we had examined in chapter two. Since an analysis of Kierkegaard's most finalised theory of the political has been provided, it is worth re-evaluating some of the views that are found in contemporary Kierkegaard scholarship. This will be the goal of the next, concluding sub-section.

### 6.3.1 Kierkegaard's theory of the political, and contemporary Kierkegaard scholarship reconsidered.

Now we are also in a position to contrast Kierkegaard's theory of the political with contemporary interpretations of Kierkegaard's political thought. As we saw in chapter two above, many contemporary Kierkegaard scholars lamented the fact that Kierkegaard offers little to no guidance with regards to what policies we ought to pursue. Let us offer our response to this concern.

As we have seen, Kierkegaard refrained from providing clues as to which policies he might have (positively) condoned. The only theoretical commitment that appears to concern Kierkegaard, with regards to positive policies, is simply that they are 'genuine'; that is, they respect the boundaries that are appropriate to the political realm. Kierkegaard does not say anything more specific than this. Whether or not Kierkegaard would have condoned certain policies or not as conducive towards spiritual deepening is a difficult and hermeneutically problematic question. Given the difficulties involved in such a task, as well as the overwhelming evidence that

Kierkegaard preferred avoiding such questions and saw them as potential liabilities to spiritual development, I would suggest that Kierkegaard does not leave us with the theoretical basis for a positive programme of policy change that could confidently be described as faithful to Kierkegaard's key commitments. Kierkegaard does, however, provide us with an existential theory of the political that can be used to endorse *negative* policy change (see 'Figure 1.1: Working Taxonomy of Key Political Terms' above, #4.3, for a description of these and other terms and their differences).

The majority of contemporary literature has taken Kierkegaard's political quietism (with regards to positive policy change) to be a response to a particular historical situation. As we saw above (e.g., in section 3.1), Kierkegaard went to extra efforts to guard his existential thought from being used by his perhaps politically overzealous contemporaries for political reform. As with many theorists that take Kierkegaard's political quietism to be a 'corrective' to a specific, historical situation, this thesis has also emphasised that Kierkegaard was particularly worried about the impact he thought his philosophy might have had on contemporary issues. As we have seen, Kierkegaard had expressed the worry that his contemporaries had an unhealthily optimistic and philosophically unjustified belief that political entities could solve non-political problems.

Whether Kierkegaard was personally fighting against a historically contingent trend, i.e., whether his work was really a corrective to what he saw as a particularly dangerous view of the political is not relevant here though. Kierkegaard provides an existential theory of the political, and the theoretical kernel of it remains consistent throughout the authorship (see p.139 above for the key tenets of this). In other words,

Kierkegaard maintains some basic theoretical commitments that respond to but are not irreducibly affected by any social and political change that he might have encountered. Included in those commitments is the refusal to provide suggestions for what positive policy change might aid spiritual development, because the political realm, properly speaking, ought to only regulate temporal affairs and not spiritual matters.

The fact that Kierkegaard was wary of how his contemporaries might have interpreted his authorship is relevant with regards to understanding some aspects of his thought. It might explain why, for example, only two fragments of the sources that outline his theory of the political (and which were examined in chapter three above) were printed during his lifetime.<sup>139</sup> But the theory of the political that Kierkegaard develops maintains a theoretical commitment to refraining from giving philosophical justifications for positive political suggestions. Not only does this abstention occur even in pieces that Kierkegaard kept private (such as the journal entries) but it also accords with the entirety of Kierkegaard's authorship. This implies that there is little reason to see these elements of his thought as written with the intention of serving as a corrective to a historically contingent situation.

Furthermore, it has hopefully become clear that an essential aspect of Kierkegaard's theory of the political is that the worldly realm and the spiritual realm are quite radically separate. Kierkegaard's key political commitment is simply in maintaining the separateness of the two spheres (and even then, he engages in more ostensibly political matters only reluctantly so). Hence, any attempt to 'reconstruct' from

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<sup>139</sup> The two works that were published by Kierkegaard are 'An Open Letter' and 'For-Self Examination' – both of which were published in 1851. The sections from *The Point of View* that we used were not printed in Kierkegaard's lifetime; nor were the parts of Kierkegaard's journals that dealt with Luther's reform; and neither was 'Judge For Yourselves!'



Kierkegaard's existential commitments what positive policies Kierkegaard may have condoned will, I suggest, be necessarily 'un-Kierkegaardian'. If my interpretation is correct, Kierkegaard does not just happen to refrain from providing a positive policy programme just because he feared that his contemporary situation was one where this project would be misunderstood. Kierkegaard's decision never to provide guidelines for a positive policy programme is, by way of contrast, an essential aspect of his general theory of the political.

This conclusion, as we saw earlier, had been reached by Daniel Conway: though for very different reasons. Conway had simply stated that any reconstruction of Kierkegaard's political thought, with regards to positive policy making, ought to be considered 'un-Kierkegaardian': and I assumed that this was simply to denote that the 'reconstructed' elements of Kierkegaard's thought include topics which Kierkegaard did not himself explicitly engage in. In other words, Conway points out that as a matter of empirical fact Kierkegaard never gave positive political suggestions. I have argued instead that Kierkegaard could not even *theoretically* have combined his theory of the political with a programme of positive policy suggestions, given the characteristics of the former (i.e., given that existential commitments are always to be prioritised over political ones).

To clarify, however: I do think that Kierkegaard's theory of the political can be used to *condemn* certain political activities. Kierkegaard's theory of the political offers us an account of what political actions might be illegitimate. If political entities seek to control non-political areas of life to the general detriment of individuals then they are 'ungenuine'. This fact alone, however, does not justify external political change; for

Kierkegaard's principal interest in existential development often overlooks the fact that political entities might be acting illegitimately.

Political failures in providing adequate temporal welfare for its citizenry is ultimately of less importance for Kierkegaard than that of improving the existential development of such individuals. Hence, resorting to political reform to solve existential problems may well lead to an increase in the temporal welfare of such individuals; but if the spiritual aspect of the typical individual found in such a situation is put in jeopardy then the reform will have done more harm than good. Additionally, a temporal, political change cannot be justified on existentialist grounds because this might lead political entities to wish to regulate spiritual wellbeing. Yet the two are logically incompatible and ought to be kept separate because they produce potentially disastrous consequences when erroneously mixed. Hence, a deficiency in the temporal aspect of the person ought to be solved for civic reasons and with political means, (as Kierkegaard may well agree); but this is not Kierkegaard's project.

Kierkegaard, or one endorsing his existential theory of the political, could not risk providing an existentially-motivated programme for positive policy change; not even for the sake of increasing temporal wellbeing. Such a programme would risk causing accidental existential impoverishment and this is worse, according to Kierkegaard, than a decrease in our temporal welfare. As long as an existentially based method of improving the (existential) wellbeing of our fellows is a viable alternative to proposing positive political changes, the former activity should therefore always be prioritised. Hence, Kierkegaard condones the use of genuinely political means in securing civic liberties and in maximising the temporal wellbeing of the citizenry, but

it is not clear that he would prioritise this task over that of seeking to existentially aid one's fellows. This is where many modern-day liberals (and perhaps even some contemporary Kierkegaard scholars) might part ways with Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political.

So, if political entities seek to control non-political areas of life to the general detriment of individuals then they should be deemed 'ungenuine'. As I have intimated at though, Kierkegaard would still not think that this is a sufficient justification for political activism. Given this integral aspect of his thought, some Kierkegaard scholars might be worried that Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political condones political quietism. Many contemporary scholars have neglected to consider Kierkegaard's late authorship, however. If we recall that Kierkegaard's late authorship provides the theoretical basis for justifying existentially motivated political activism then the notion that Kierkegaard was a political quietist becomes less tenable. For if a political entity is both 'ungenuine' *and* renders one's ability to existentially edify one's fellows ineffective then we have existential grounds for calling for political reform.

Having now argued that Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political can be used to justify negative policy change (in chapters five and six), let us return to some of the contemporary literature on Kierkegaard's political thought (briefly examined in chapter two). Bruce Fletcher, let us recall, had given some pretty critical arguments against Kierkegaard's theory of the political. Fletcher deemed Kierkegaard's political thought '[...] severely defective in its minimization of the essential ingredient of activism' (Fletcher, 1982, 72); an 'idealistic and impractical' 'approach to concrete

political and social problems' (*ibid.*, 73); and a 'quietistic philosophy of resignation' which is 'impotent' in response 'to concrete realities' (*ibid.*, 71-2).

If we judge Kierkegaard's political activism from the view of a liberal theory of the political then Kierkegaard's thought might indeed be judged as overly (and perhaps even unduly) quietist with regards to some political issues. Even from this point of view, however, it is hard to agree with Fletcher's comments. Kierkegaard's thought, we have argued, is not 'quietistic' or politically resigned. It is far from obvious as to why Kierkegaard's theory of the political should therefore be deemed 'defective' with regards to the 'minimization' of activism; and calling it 'impotent' with regards to 'concrete realities' is also surely overstating the case. As Kierkegaard's polemical attack on Denmark's established state religion shows, a theory of political activism is entirely consistent with Kierkegaard's theory of the political.

Furthermore, we must remember that though Kierkegaard does not pretend to provide guidelines for policy-making he does see it as an important and legitimate task. Even from the existential point of view, a healthy political system is conducive towards existential development. After all, it just might be that one's task of spiritual deepening might become less burdensome and obstructed if one's temporal welfare is in order (i.e., neither overly indulged nor neglected). Kierkegaard simply leaves this specific task to those who are skilled at it. All this is to say that Kierkegaard sets out to provide a theory of the political rather than a positive policy program. Yet Kierkegaard's theory of the political is fully complimentary to this latter task. If anything, Kierkegaard's theory of the political serves as an important tool for ensuring

that political activity is kept within its legitimate scope, which may even lead to the temporal improvement of citizens being more efficiently catered for.

Kierkegaard provides arguments as to why the political and the existential aspects of life ought to be kept separate and seeks to ensure that policy-making does not trespass upon the individuals' engagement with spiritual development. Hence, political reform is not itself the target of Kierkegaard's criticism. Kierkegaard only criticises political reform that illegitimately attempts to solve spiritual problems with political means where alternative existential options are still viable. In response to a perceived over-enthusiasm with regards to the ability of the political realm to solve all of life's problems, Kierkegaard might have voiced complaints concerning political activism on more than one occasion. Yet his call for the separation of church and state shows that Kierkegaard is not completely averse to keeping political entities in check. As such, Kierkegaard establishes a standard for judging which policy changes might be existentially acceptable and which should be openly protested against. Furthermore, one might even regard Kierkegaard's theory of political activism as a vital aspect of spiritual deepening – both at the individual as well as the social level (a view which will be argued for in the next chapter).

This chapter has hopefully challenged the claim that Kierkegaard's political thought is quietistic and/or incompatible with political reform/activism. This, nevertheless, only addresses one of the two perennial arguments for believing that Kierkegaard has nothing politically interesting to say. The second argument is that even if we accept that Kierkegaard has a theory of political activism and reform, his philosophy is still essentially individualistic nonetheless (being, as it is, directed towards the existential

development of the 'single individual'). Perhaps the best and most well-known articulation of this claim is to be found in the work of Theodor Adorno. Adorno's critique of Kierkegaard's theory of the political will therefore be the focus of the next chapter. In outlining the specifically social aspect of Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political, however, we will also see what Kierkegaard believes the ideal relationship between the political and the non-political should be. Hence, we will highlight what Kierkegaard's vision of 'genuine' politics is, a term which might have otherwise eluded us hitherto.

## CHAPTER SEVEN:

### ‘Genuine’ Politics and ‘Genuine’ Sociability.

#### Introduction.

Two primary arguments have often been levelled against Kierkegaard's political thought. Both criticisms would also challenge Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political as I have outlined it thus far. In the previous chapter I responded to one of the two common arguments for thinking that Kierkegaard ought to be considered an apolitical theorist. I argued that Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political is responsive to real-world policy making and provides a theoretical justification for fighting for the amendment or abolition of certain ‘ungenuine’ and existentially harmful governmental policies.

In this final chapter I will address another strong challenge to Kierkegaard's political thought via a criticism that was popularised by Theodor Adorno's work *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* and pursued throughout Adorno's literary career. Adorno argues that Kierkegaard has a political ideology, but that it supports a kind of political conservatism. Adorno might have been willing to accept that Kierkegaard has an existential theory of the political. Nevertheless, Adorno argues that

Kierkegaard's philosophical outlook is shaped by an individualistic mentality that (inadvertently or not) supports a particular political stance - namely, bourgeoisie quietism. As such, it could be argued that Adorno's criticism of Kierkegaard's political thought is not so much that the latter is 'impotent' with regards to real-world changes, for Adorno could well accept that Kierkegaard's theory of the political justifies external change. Adorno's criticism, however, would be that the *type* of external change that Kierkegaard's individualistic philosophy justifies could only be one that supports a reactionary, conservative political stance. As such, any of Kierkegaard's justifications for negative policy changes could still ultimately only condone the bourgeoisie status quo and any inequalities entrenched within it. Hence Kierkegaard's theory of the political is not impotent with regards to worldly change but is still nevertheless powerless at combating class-based inequalities.

Adorno's criticism is one prominent and well-argued articulation of the charge that Kierkegaard's philosophy is essentially individualistic. As we have seen throughout this thesis, Kierkegaard's emphasis on existential and spiritual development has indeed constantly been addressed to the single individual. Furthermore, Kierkegaard frequently advises the single individual to stand aside from relations with 'others' and from an engagement with externalities in order to undertake spiritual deepening. Given that the foundation of Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political is an unwavering regard for the spiritual development of *the single individual*, it might be perfectly plausible to suggest that the only policy alterations it could justify would also be necessarily individualistic by nature. Most scholars that take an individualistic reading of Kierkegaard's authorship do not even recognise that Kierkegaard has any social or political thought, let alone a theory of the political. Nevertheless, the claim



that an existentially based theory of the political must be defectively individualistic is certainly one that must be answered. This chapter aims to provide a response.

I will argue that Kierkegaard addresses the criticism of neglecting social inequalities when his theory of the political is combined with other aspects of his work; his anthropology and his social theory, for example (7.2). In doing so, I will outline an additional facet of Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political, an aspect that I have called 'concessionary politics'. This additional element also provides further evidence for refuting the charge that Kierkegaard's theory of the political is impotent with regards to real-world changes. Furthermore, I will argue that Kierkegaard's ideal vision of sociability, as elucidated in detail in the book *Works of Love* [hereafter simply; WOL], is fully complimentary to his existential theory of the political (7.3). In fact, I shall argue that the individual's task of becoming a self is necessarily *interpersonal* (7.4). This will create a bridge between Kierkegaard's theory of the political and his social thought: for genuine sociability is in fact only possible when Kierkegaard's theory of the political is respected, and when the existential development of each and every individual has been safeguard against (7.5). Not only are Kierkegaard's social theory and existential theory of the political thus inexorably interlinked but also neither of them permits an individualistic interpretation.

An analysis of Kierkegaard's piece *Works of Love* will therefore be central to both this chapter and to my thesis. Adorno, as well as many other contemporary scholars, uses *Works of Love* to support an individualistic reading of Kierkegaard where I will use it (along with some of Kierkegaard's journal entries) to outline Kierkegaard's

social theory. An examination of this text, as well as of Adorno's general criticism of Kierkegaard will thus be the central focus of this chapter.

## 7.1 Theodor Adorno's critical involvement with Kierkegaard

### 7.1.1 Adorno's: *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*

Theodor Adorno developed an early interest in Kierkegaard that stayed with him throughout his life. This interest led Adorno to write three principle texts which explicitly address aspects of Kierkegaard's thought: *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* [1933]; *On Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love* [1939]; and *Kierkegaard Once More* [1963]. Aside from these works, Adorno also maintained a lifelong interest in his contemporaries' reception of Kierkegaard; by both existentialists and theologians alike.

*Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* is undoubtedly Adorno's most extensive treatment of Kierkegaard's thought. In it, Adorno pursues compelling and novel critiques of some of the most fundamental principles of Kierkegaard's thought. Adorno's charge that Kierkegaard's philosophy is essentially individualistic is so authoritative that it has informed many contemporary scholars who defend the same basic position. Similarly, Adorno's (Marxist-influenced) joint critique of Kierkegaard's political position as essentially aligned with bourgeois conservatism, and (hence) of being little use for fighting against real-world inequality, is a critique that is still voiced by some contemporary scholars.

Adorno never rescinds the critique of Kierkegaard's political thought that is so thoroughly developed in *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*. On the contrary, Adorno's later works build upon the arguments of his debut piece. Nevertheless, I will primarily focus on the second of Adorno's principle works on Kierkegaard: *On Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love*. The reasons for focussing on this piece in particular are firstly because I think that it is Adorno's strongest articulation of the argument that Kierkegaard's theory of the political is unavoidably individualistic; and secondly, because in responding to Adorno's analysis of *Works of Love* I shall also outline why I think the same text presents Kierkegaard's social theory. This outline will therefore also make some progress in showing how Kierkegaard's theory of the political is ultimately tied to genuine sociability.

#### 7.1.1.2 My interpretation of Kierkegaard's authorship

Throughout this thesis I have tacitly worked with an understanding of Kierkegaard's authorial project. I have assumed that if a quote from Kierkegaard's signed works (or in extraordinary and extenuating circumstances pseudonymous authorship) coheres with similar views or philosophical principles that are articulated in other areas of his authorship then there is good reason for believing the former to be 'Kierkegaard's view'. A strict reliance on what the signed works alone reveal would yield a rather limited account of what Kierkegaard's own views might have been. Kierkegaard often develops some of his most important concepts in great depth in his pseudonymous works. Typically, however, Kierkegaard separates his own view(s) from those of the

pseudonyms in his 'signed' journal entries. Even when Kierkegaard fails to explicitly state that he personally endorses one of the pseudonymous views, it can sometimes be safely inferred that he does anyway.<sup>140</sup> Sometimes, for example, it is clear from Kierkegaard's signed writings that he shares the same underlying commitments of one or more of the pseudonymous views (in a similar context, at least); and sometimes the views of the latter authorship help clarify and make coherent the philosophical principles of the signed authorship. In such cases, and always with close attention paid to the time and context that an idea is articulated in, it might be that a statement which is voiced by a pseudonym is arguably Kierkegaard's own view of the matter.

Hence, in contrast to an interpretation that only takes Kierkegaard's signed works to actually express his 'real' views, I advocate a more interpretive understanding of Kierkegaard's authorship. On the other hand, however, I do not advocate the position that all, or (what comes to the same) none of Kierkegaard's texts can be said to reveal Kierkegaard's own personal views. Kierkegaard wrote letters, for example, to his contemporaries and to his friends. These letters often contained insights into his own personal views; views that can also be verified by journal entries.<sup>141</sup> To believe that Kierkegaard's letters to his real-life friends might have been part of an elaborate exercise in post-modern irony (friends who visited him on his deathbed no less!) is surely supposing too much.

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<sup>140</sup> To be fair, I do not think that there are any occurrences of this in this thesis. Nevertheless, I would not be against it in principle.

<sup>141</sup> See, for example, Letters 186, 187, and 188, in Kierkegaard's *Letters and Documents* (pp. 260-261, pp. 265-266, and p. 270, respectively). In these letters to his contemporary and friend, J.L.A. Kolderup-Rosenvinge [1792 – 1850], Kierkegaard gives additional defence of the existential theory of the political that I have argued runs through and informs the whole authorship. For scholarly literature on the political view that these letters advocate, see: Tilley, 2008a; and Kirmmse, 1995.

In his *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, Adorno argues that Kierkegaard's real-world (conscious or unconscious) philosophical views (including his philosophical individualism) are inadvertently voiced by his pseudonyms. Adorno then goes on to examine some of the views of the pseudonyms and, working backwards, discovers what he takes to be Kierkegaard's own views. Kierkegaard explicitly writes about his relation to the pseudonymous authorship, however, in some of his later journal entries and in the full version of *The Point of View*. In *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* though, Adorno advises the reader not to take Kierkegaard's word at this and instead argues that all of the material of the authorship, pseudonymous and non-pseudonymous alike, represents Kierkegaard's own viewpoint (Adorno, 1989, 13; cf. 11, and 40-51).

As it stands, I think that Adorno's methodology (in *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, at least) is weak, and even philosophically untenable. For example, Adorno frequently examines the views of the pseudonym 'A' in order to conclude that Kierkegaard, like the pseudonym, must be a philosophical individualist. Later in his (signed) authorship, however, Kierkegaard explicitly states that he desired this particular pseudonym to be archetypal of a particular kind of reflective aestheticism. A chief characteristic of this particular reflective aesthete is that he is predominantly individualistic. In fact, if in *Either/Or I* we are presented with a character who does not want to have any long-term social commitments at all, *Either/Or II* features a character with the completely opposite world-view. These opposing world views, furthermore, are arguably as detailed and coherent as each other. Taking *all* of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms to be representatives of his own beliefs would only result in a plethora of logically inconsistent beliefs. (To his credit, I think that Adorno might

see this as the intended effect of Kierkegaard's literary methodology. See, for example; *ibid.*, 11.)

To make my point in another way, many authors purposely design individualistic characters in order to highlight the latter's loneliness and sometimes their downfall. The moral message intended might be that friendship and inter-personal relationships are an intrinsically valuable aspect of life. The character 'Ralph Nickleby' from Charles Dickens' *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* is one such example of a character that is depicted as lonely, since Ralph only cares about himself and in stockpiling money. His crass individualism ultimately leads him to become ostracised from those around him and at the end of the novel he commits suicide. It is rather clear, from the plot if nothing else, that Charles Dickens does not personally advocate the radical individualism or money-fetishism that his character 'Ralph Nickleby' embodies. (If nothing else, a happy ending meets those who fight for social justice and camaraderie, hinting at the fact that this is more likely what Dickens personally endorses.) If Dickens had, furthermore, written in a journal entry or a letter to a friend that he purposely used the fictive character of Ralph Nicklby to highlight how those who ignore (or perpetrated) social injustices led less fulfilling lives, we would have very good grounds for suspecting that Charles Dickens personally believed that money-fetishism leads to unhappiness.<sup>142</sup>

This example might be seen as a poor analogy in contrast to both Kierkegaard's highly complex authorship and to Adorno's equally multi-layered critique.

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<sup>142</sup> One might think that even if Charles Dickens did happen to exhibit an obvious fetishism for money in his real life, this fact would still not bear on whether the views of his characters are correct or not. Therefore, one might wonder whether Adorno's examination of Kierkegaard's personal life to see whether they affect his publications is not a version of the genetic fallacy. Philosophers ought only to assess the truthfulness and validity of Kierkegaard's arguments, irrespective of their origins.

Nevertheless, I believe that the methodology employed in *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* is flawed due to the fact that Adorno is, after all, primarily examining the philosophical thought of Kierkegaard's most asocial (perhaps even anti-social) character(s). For a fairer treatment of Kierkegaard's authorship, one would at least expect Adorno to examine Kierkegaard's more social works. Thankfully, this is precisely what Adorno does with his second major piece on Kierkegaard, for in his *Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love*, Adorno takes a very close reading of Kierkegaard's signed work on social theory, *Works of Love*.



## 7.2 Adorno's critique of *Works of Love*.

Adorno makes two major criticisms against Kierkegaard's doctrine of love. Firstly, Adorno presses the charge that Kierkegaard's doctrine of love is ultimately 'impotent' with regards to socio-political recommendations concerning the temporal wellbeing of each human being. Kierkegaard's doctrine of love, Adorno argues, ultimately leads to an advocating of abstention from socio-economic and political affairs. Despite Kierkegaard's apparent support of political quietism, the ironic result is that this actually endorses a political position; one which supports a reactionary, conservative defence of the bourgeois status quo. In other words, professing that one ought not to involve oneself in political affairs when class oppression is systematically being enforced and when one is a member of the ruling class is nevertheless taking a (bourgeois) political stance.

Secondly, Adorno accuses Kierkegaard of treating the people that one encounters in the world, one's neighbour, as merely an instrument for one's own spiritual development. A further aspect of Adorno's critique is that the people we meet come to be stripped of their particularities, so that Kierkegaard's doctrine of neighbour-love is ultimately 'callous[ness]' (Adorno, 1939, 10, 16).

Adorno ostensibly criticises Kierkegaard's doctrine of love. Nevertheless, Adorno's criticism also relates to numerous aspects of Kierkegaard's thought. For Adorno

recognises that Kierkegaard's doctrine is based upon a wider interest in prioritising spiritual over temporal welfare, a prioritisation that Adorno critiques.<sup>143</sup> Furthermore, Kierkegaard's doctrine of love underlies his social (and at least for Adorno, political) thought. Hence, Adorno's critical assessment of Kierkegaard's doctrine of love is based upon a wider critique of the philosophical individualism that allegedly underlies Kierkegaard's entire authorship.

The second argument that Adorno raises against Kierkegaard, one that has subsequently been re-stated by contemporary scholars, is that Kierkegaard's emphasis on the importance of God as a kind of mediating aspect of one's relations with others leads to real-world individuals being ignored. Adorno's argument for this does appear to directly follow from Kierkegaard's doctrine of love, as it were. Why do, or ought we love people, Kierkegaard asks? Or, what are the grounds (if there are any) for loving another person? Often we give preferential love to someone, as a 'lover' or as a friend, because we value the traits that the person owns. We might have similar or contrasting traits as these but the important part is that we value them. Additionally, we might find the traits pleasant or perhaps intriguing. Perhaps in this regard each person is different. In any case, such aspects of preferential love do not primarily concern Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard argues that unless one loves another because of the

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<sup>143</sup> From hereafter I will refer to the idea that Kierkegaard prioritises the spiritual to the temporal 'prioritarianism'. This has nothing to do with the consequentialist, ethical view. The term is inspired by Bruce Kirmmse's argument that Kierkegaard's political view is best thought of as 'prioritarian[ism]' (Kirmmse, 1990b: 295, and 339). 'Prioritarianism', Kirmmse argues, is a stance where one first relates to God and only then to social or political issues. Kirmmse bases this view on Kierkegaard's reading of Mathew 6:24-34, where one is told to 'Seek *first* the Kingdom of God' *then* political/social concerns (1990b: 295, and 339, original emphasis). Hence, Kirmmse concludes that for Kierkegaard, concerns with 'worldly affairs' (and here he means 'social and political responsibilities') '[...] must be seen as subordinate to the individual's relation to God' (*ibid.*, 295).

Whilst I am inspired by Kirmmse's argument and will also employ the term 'prioritarianism' to describe Kierkegaard's political view, I will differ from Kirmmse's original use slightly. For where Kirmmse used the term to describe one relating first and foremost to *God* before political issues, I argue instead that Kierkegaard prioritises spiritual development *in any form* (i.e., a development from the aesthetic to the ethical) to political concerns.

fact that the other contains a spiritual, infinite element, all other reasons for loving (or perhaps more accurately, 'preferring') another person will ultimately be based on attributes that are finite. Hence, one can love another person because of an eternal trait that the other has (such as the spiritual aspect of the self), or because of a temporal trait.

Kierkegaard spends a great deal of the book *Works of Love* showing how preferential love (love based on certain temporal features of the other) is, by itself, necessarily fickle and susceptible to destruction (e.g.; WOL, 8, 31-37). Since the finite aspects of a person are finite by nature, they are perpetually susceptible to both external fluctuations as well as internal change. A love that is established upon such traits can only be as long-lasting and contingent as the temporal traits themselves. Kierkegaard believes that this is exactly what characterises preferential love such as friendship and/or erotic love.

A love that is based on the eternal aspect of the other is, by contrast, one that escapes the contingent nature of temporally-based love. Kierkegaard argues that the Christian concept of neighbour-love is an example of love that is based upon an infinite, unchanging aspect of the 'other', and thus avoids the otherwise inherent fickleness of temporal love.

We might still wonder how it is that we *could* love another person in this way. Christian neighbour-love cannot be based on contingent, temporal characteristics (not alone at least), or it is no better than preferential love. Yet even if we love the infinite aspect of the neighbour, is maintaining this love not also contingent upon our own

finite ability to do so? If so, won't neighbour-love be just as problematic (i.e., 'fickle') as preferential love? We saw above that humans are partly temporal beings who often fail to fully exercise their spiritual capacity. It is also plausible, then, for one to find the psychical-physical aspects of the neighbour quite unlovable. We would prefer not to love such a person - and so why should we?

In order to make our (neighbour-)love secure, love must stem *from* the infinite, spiritual aspect of the self and *to* the spiritual aspect of the other. We have already seen Kierkegaard argue that our design and task in this life is to become as much of a spiritual being as possible; to have the spiritual aspect of the self regulate the psychical-physical aspects in all matters. We have also seen how and why this might be incredibly difficult. Ultimately then, it cannot simply be up to us, each one individually, as to whether we *want* to love our neighbour or not, since Kierkegaard recognises that we are a being which is tasked with spiritual development but which is also liable to fall into spiritual laxity. Human efforts and desires alone would not be an adequate basis for love of one's neighbour. Hence, the demand to love one's neighbour is given to us from an external, eternal source. It is a command, and it is commanded to us by God. The individual is under the duty of obeying God's command to love the neighbour (and it is hence sinfulness not to) even if one lacks the preferential, temporal reasons for doing so.

Adorno emphasises that for Kierkegaard, securing spiritual wellbeing is prioritised over obtaining temporal welfare. I think that Adorno is correct to highlight this feature of Kierkegaard's thought, a feature that (modifying Bruce Kirmmse's original use of the term, see n.143 above) I shall call 'prioritarianism'. For Adorno, Kierkegaard's

prioritarianism implies that one's duty and love towards God will always outweigh the care that one affords to the temporal welfare of one's fellow beings. Adorno also argues that this prioritarianism turns love of one's neighbour into a mere means for the subjective, inward experience of the lover to God. Adorno recognises that the love we give to the neighbour is based upon faith in the belief in God, and also correctly notes that the love of the neighbour is not based upon any other, humanly understandable rationale. Basing love of the neighbour on a *desirable* or *human* rationale rather than on a divine commandment would ultimately only risk making the foundation(s) of such love as contingent as those of preferential-love. (One might come to find the 'rationale' no longer intuitive or desirable, for example. As soon as one's mind is changed, the foundation for the love disappears too). Hence, the 'rationale' for loving one's neighbour must be in the form of a divine commandment, and a duty owed to God; or to each other because of God's will.

Adorno recognises, however, that if the love of the neighbour is not based upon a humanly understandable rationale, nor on any temporal features that the neighbour possesses, then the 'other' is in fact ignored, or at least 'abstract' to some extent. Adorno correctly points out that the temporal features of a specific person, the psychological and physical facts that make a person who he or she really is, are deemed irrelevant with regards to the (neighbourly) love we offer them. One's love is ultimately not directed towards the external facts about a person but by the eternal aspect that he or she partakes in. The spiritual aspect of the other is, furthermore, eternal, unchanging, and hence we might assume the same in all people. There is really nothing special or unique about the other *qua* neighbour at all then, Adorno argues. As Adorno puts it: "In spite of all the talk of the neighbour, the latter is

nothing but the stumbling-block to prove one's own [...] spiritualization of love" (*ibid.*, 11).

This criticism is probably Adorno's most influential refutation of Kierkegaard's doctrine of love in particular, but also consequently of his prioritarianism as well as his theory of genuine sociability. As such, I shall dedicate the sub-section after the next to assessing the criticism (7.3). For now I shall turn to the first criticism Adorno makes about Kierkegaard's doctrine of love – that it necessitates an 'impotence' with regards to suggesting real-world changes.

#### 7.2.1 Adorno's first critique: Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political is

impotent with regards to social inequality. Response – 'concessionary' politics.

Kierkegaard emphasises that the true nature of neighbour-love is that it must also be practised. More accurately, in fact, Kierkegaard says that faith itself necessarily leads the believer to practising works of love (JP III, 2423). Any definition of love that does not entail *works* (such as love as a feeling, or an abstract love of humanity) is most likely evidence of an 'aesthetic', non-spiritual understanding of love (*ibid.*).<sup>144</sup> Kierkegaard argues that truly loving one's neighbour *must* manifest itself in particular works of neighbour-love. The real-world manifestation of neighbour-love might

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<sup>144</sup> For the latter definition of love, perhaps it is useful to think of Ivan Karamazov, from Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan claims to love humanity despite admitting to have never loved a single, particular human being (not even his good-natured brother Alyosha). Obviously, such an abstract love of humanity is rather defective if it cannot possibly be manifested into a single, real instance of loving a neighbour. The fact that Ivan fails to prevent the murder of one of his fellow human beings (his father, no less) might also highlight the deficiency of his abstract concept of love (of humanity).

involve giving some time to a fellow contemporary; listening to them to see if they have any worries or doubts; perhaps attempting to develop them spiritually; perhaps just showing them compassion, mercy, understanding, empathy.

Despite understanding the notion that, for Kierkegaard, neighbour-love necessarily leads to works of love Adorno criticises Kierkegaard's doctrine of love for prioritising works that are 'impotent' with regard to real-world changes over more politically direct activism. Adorno correctly points out that one of the 'works of love' that Kierkegaard endorses is the act of showing mercy. Kierkegaard's example of an act of mercy is, at face value at least, admittedly liable to the charge that his doctrine of love leaves class inequalities intact, and perhaps even inadvertently justifies them. For in his discussion of mercifulness, Kierkegaard recommends that poor people show mercy to those who are rich. Furthermore, Kierkegaard advises the poor not to envy the rich for their wealth, nor to become wrapped up in a political campaign for economic equality (WOL, book II, section VII). Adorno takes such advice to be a self-serving defence of class inequalities by a member of the bourgeoisie. It cannot be denied that Kierkegaard was fortunate to have received an exceptional upbringing and was certainly not poor. Furthermore, Kierkegaard's recommendation of the poor to show mercy to the rich is also a direct result of the prioritarianism that underlies his doctrine of love, as well as his theory of the political more generally.

In responding to Adorno's worries we can highlight some features of Kierkegaard's thought that reduce the radical appearance of these comments *somewhat*. For one thing, Jamie Ferriera has noted that this particular section of *Works of Love* is

explicitly directed to those who are poor (Ferreira, 2000, 50).<sup>145</sup> Kierkegaard has already emphasised that exercising neighbour-love will necessarily lead to acts of love, and real-world changes. Hence, Kierkegaard had already stated that when love of the neighbour is genuine, generously giving one's means to those less fortunate than oneself will necessarily ensue. But Kierkegaard does not want those without the sufficient means to give charitably to feel as though they are thereby unable to practice works of love. Kierkegaard's message is hence partly intended to be edifying; whatever one's temporal, economic situation, one can still act spiritually and can practice neighbour love by having mercy for one's neighbours. The conceptual point is that spiritual development is equally and fairly accessible to all, irrespective of the temporally given facts of one's situation, which include one's class, but also one's creed, sex, or race.

Ferreira's point is excellent, but it still does not fully address all of Adorno's worries. I shall try and highlight some additional features of Kierkegaard's thought that go some way to doing so. Firstly, I do believe that Kierkegaard prioritises the spiritual aspect of the person's wellbeing to the temporal. Nevertheless, we saw in the previous chapter that when the former was endangered Kierkegaard's prioritarianism *did* justify political intervention. For obvious reasons, if someone is in a situation where their very existence is threatened, or where temporal pressures (such as terrible standards of living) are making spiritual development close to untenable then we have a spiritual justification for political intervention.

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<sup>145</sup> One does have to wonder how such an audience could have access to this work, however.



As a spiritual human being, we each have the duty of crying out against such conditions. Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political does not necessarily equip us with either the means or the requisite knowledge of making positive policy recommendations for what exactly ought to be done to best remedy the given situation. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard's theory provides us with the justificatory force for pressuring those who do have the knowledge and means to make such decisions to enact external change (for 'working with the state'...). Each individual human being ought to call for such changes to be brought about, even at the risk of persecution and martyrdom. Similarly, each has the responsibility of personally alleviating the situation with whatever means one has. Perhaps it is also worth noting that, following Kierkegaard's peculiar example of mercifulness in discussion, if we were in a situation where some people were so rich that their spiritual development was put at risk, then we would have equal grounds for fighting for political change to alter this too.

Now, fighting for political change is admittedly restricted to whether or not spiritual development is risked. Hence, if there was a situation where obvious class inequalities existed, which resulted in the perennial economic and social oppression of one class by another, but which nevertheless did not put spiritual development at risk, Kierkegaard's doctrine of love would presumably be 'impotent' with regards to fighting for external change. Perhaps it is precisely here that Adorno is in such stark disagreement with Kierkegaard. Nevertheless, I will suggest two more possible ways of defending Kierkegaard's doctrine of love from the charge that it is 'impotent' with regards to external change.

The first thing I wish to re-emphasise is that in such a situation, Kierkegaard would most likely believe that the political realm is failing. The political realm, as we have highlighted above, is supposed to ensure that the temporal wellbeing of its citizenry is catered for. We could conceive of a peculiar situation where widespread class inequalities happens to be both in the interest of the majority, as well as the optimal way of maximising the overall wellbeing of the citizenry – but this is most frequently not the case (as I think that a Marx-inspired social critique would undoubtedly have to agree).<sup>146</sup> Any ideological reason for maintaining a class inequality that clearly violates one or both of these principles is a case of ‘ungenuine’ politics. According to Kierkegaard’s view of ethics, the ethical action in such a situation is to fight for political change.

The *spiritual* thing to do, admittedly, might be to practice sympathy and mercy. Adorno is certainly correct to worry that at the epitome of existential development Kierkegaard’s individual would, if she or he was acting spiritually, apparently refrain from the battle for political change that an *ethically*-minded individual might be tempted to engage in. Once more, however, we should note that Kierkegaard only admonishes political engagement that *jeopardises* spiritual development. Throughout his authorship, Kierkegaard articulated his worry of engaging in political activity for civic reasons (his refusal to advocate civic marriage, for example [section 3.1]) because it risked causing existential impoverishment. All things being equal, (i.e., as long as spiritual development is not threatened) a religious person could still plausibly

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<sup>146</sup> Though Marx does (typically) argue that the interests of the numerically dominant class represent the universal interests of the race (e.g., Marx & Engels, 2008, 45), this same class is notably always *unrepresented* by the state (e.g., *ibid.*, 9; see also Marx, 2008, 100). Engels had also argued the same point (Engels, 2004, 140), though he had noted that when the means of production were shifting from one class to another, the state *might* temporarily cease to represent the interests of either the ruling or the oppressed class (*ibid.*, 154).

be ethically committed to fighting for political change in the interest of increasing the temporal welfare of a minority group.

One final thing to note is that Kierkegaard understands Christianity as a discipline that asks the single individual to become *entirely* spirit. This is presumably the spiritual *ideal*. Nevertheless, a central aspect of Kierkegaard's thought (primarily, perhaps, because it explains the Christian doctrine of original sin, as well as grace) is that no human being could ever be expected to live the life of pure spirit that Christianity ideally demands of us (e.g., CD, 299; UDVS, 151; WOL, 132, 190). We are part flesh and blood, not just spirit (JP IV, 4336). Furthermore, flesh and blood, and spirit are opposites (JP IV, 4354). If we were the type of being that did not have a temporal aspect, the task of becoming pure spirit might even be pleasurable (JP IV, 4336). As we are not, however, "[...] we are [barely] able to endure being spirit" (JP IV, 4341) and so concessions are made for us.

According to Kierkegaard, Christianity recognises that human weakness frequently puts the ideally spiritual life at risk. Rather than being seen as a failure, however, Kierkegaard believes that recognising one's distance from the spiritually ideal path is evidence that one is genuinely concerned with spiritual development. Hence Kierkegaard writes that:

No religious person, even the purest, has sheer, purified, subjectivity or pure transparency in willing solely what God wills, so that there is not a residue of his original subjectivity [...] But as the old devotional literature rightly teaches, the individual is completely innocent in this. Far from being something to be charged against him, these thoughts that try the spirit prove that he has really become thoroughly involved and engaged (JP IV, 4384).

So being tempted into spiritual laxity is something we, as beings who are not wholly spirit, should only expect (JP IV, 4336). We might argue, however, that we should still devote all of our effort in striving towards becoming pure spirit. Again, however, Kierkegaard makes many remarks that are more accommodating to ethical and aesthetic interests than we might have supposed. Kierkegaard does think that we must frequently lapse in our task of becoming pure spirit and that, Christianly viewed, this is sin (JP IV, 4352). Nevertheless, Kierkegaard's interest is not to attempt to make us the kinds of beings that are *never* tempted into aesthetic or ethical indulgence, only to make sure we honestly confess that in such cases we must ask God for His good grace and forgiveness (JP III, 2881).<sup>147</sup> The following journal entry exemplifies Kierkegaard's acceptance of spiritual concessions:

If we, in our present way of life, are to be truthful before God, we would have to talk like this: I understand very well that to become spirit is really the requirement, but could you not grant me a little indulgence, permit me the grace of not having such thoughts come too close to me, for I would so much like to enjoy the things of this earth, and, Lord God, I do not pretend to be stronger than I am-I am only a child. (JP IV, 4339)

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<sup>147</sup> In another journal entry, Kierkegaard seems to deny the possibility (or desirability) of leading a wholly spiritually life. Hence, Kierkegaard uses the fact that we 'do not have a direct and immediate relationship to God', and that 'between the God-man and the ordinary human there lies a qualitative difference' to show the necessity of requiring God's good grace (JP III, 2897). Additionally, the New Testament is 'not literally regulative for us ordinary human beings', because it apparently addresses those who had a more immediate relationship to God (the apostle Paul, for example) than we currently do. This leads Kierkegaard to conclude that 'an ordinary man cannot or dare not (even though he ever so honestly would)' base his life on striving to imitate Jesus Christ (*ibid.*).

The fact that the New Testament is not strictly regulative for us also emphasises that one's God-relationship is ultimately based on one's own fallible interpretation of the Bible, and hence that it is one's own responsibility, as well as one's own task. Since an existential attempt at developing a God relationship will always be at least partially based upon one's limited and fallible knowledge, the ultimate need to resort to God's grace is also emphasised.

Perhaps, one might object, the advice from this journal entry is directed at a *specific* situation only; one where spiritual laxity is widespread and yet unrecognized. After all, Kierkegaard does state that if '*we, in our present way of life*' want to be honest before God, then this is what we ought to do. Kierkegaard might, therefore, not be making recommendations that are applicable to each and every person.

Nevertheless, Kierkegaard does also state elsewhere that any human being can become *too* engrossed in the task of whole-heartedly becoming pure spirit. Not to recognise that, due to one's inevitable weaknesses, one could never be pure spirit, is not to pay attention to the fact that one is partly temporal. Furthermore, overzealousness with regards to becoming pure spirit can even be a way of inadvertently denying an aspect of God's love (JP IV, 4373). Either such a person recognises that the task of becoming pure spirit must inevitably seek God's good grace, or one believes that the ideally spiritual can be attained by human effort alone (i.e., autonomously).<sup>148</sup> The latter is a sin because it neglects to recognise that true freedom and spiritual endeavouring is made possible only because of God. But the former also puts one into a sinful relation to God as well.

In one's spiritual striving, one must fail and hence seek God's forgiveness and love. To overzealously strive to become spirit will only imply that one demands 'too much of God' by asking for His love and forgiveness too frequently and on one's *own* terms (*ibid.*). In response to such a person, Kierkegaard recommends him or her not to '[...] presume too much [of God, or of one's ability to fulfil one's spiritual demand(s)], [and] not become a self-tormentor' (*ibid.*). Furthermore, Kierkegaard advises a little

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<sup>148</sup> See also: "Even when I sacrifice most [which can be read: 'all'] for a good cause, I still depend on God's helping me to see it through, and therefore I still have not done it for God's sake but at best have acted in reliance upon God, with him in reserve" (JP III, 2424).

later in the same entry to 'take care [with regards to spiritually submitting 'unconditionally to everything' and asking for God's help, because] *you are not completely spirit*' (*ibid.*, my emphasis. Cf. JP III, 2898: "[...] the New Testament is not literally regulative for us ordinary human beings"). As a dialectical response to this potentiality for excessive spiritual zeal, Kierkegaard even recommends "[...] innocent human aids (diversion, physical recreation, etc.) which *a man dare not disregard* without demanding too much of God" (*ibid.*, my emphasis).<sup>149</sup>

In order to be reminded of one's humility in the face of God, and of one's need for His continual love and forgiveness, it is quite natural for the human being to give in to temptations towards ethical and aesthetic action. It may be, therefore, that one recognises that one's spiritual task is to constantly practice works of love, such as mercy. It is only natural and expectable, however, that the human being is distracted by sights that demand his or her ethical action (or aesthetic fancy, for that matter). Giving in to these temptations might appear to imply failing one's spiritually ideal task. It might seem peculiar (and perhaps even perverse, to the 'natural man') to think that helping one's fellows in times of gratuitous oppression, and in a situation that Kierkegaard has explicitly termed 'ungenuine' politics, might be 'giving in to

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<sup>149</sup> We should note that the recommendation of diversionary aids to such people are "[...] so rare that they can be handled appropriately as exceptions. The norm, therefore is: in a few exceptional cases recommend diversionary aids, but as a rule prescribe aids of the spirit, for men [usually] use diversionary aids all too promiscuously of their own accord." (*ibid.*). On this note, see also: JP IV, 4161, where Kierkegaard argues that the natural relationship between a child and an adult is a beneficial 'corrective' to 'a person becoming pure spirit or from becoming too serious etc.' See also: JP III, 2428 – "[...] if you discern that God overstrains you, then accept these human aids [erotic love and friendship] as an aid.[...] God is no cruel creditor and mortgage holder, nor should a human being presume to want to be more than a human being, a demon or God-man." All Kierkegaard asks is that the person become 'humbled' by the fact that he or she receives all 'human aid[s] [...] as something beautiful which God blesses', and in recognition of the fact that to become 'enamoured with it [the aids]' is to risk forgetting 'what is truly the earnestness of life'.

temptation' that is also, spiritually speaking, 'sinful'.<sup>150</sup> Despite this judgement, however, there is nothing in Kierkegaard's theory of spirituality and/or his anthropology that rules out such ethical actions, even in an individual who is dedicated to spiritual development. Hence, 'sinful' engagements such as political campaigning for economic equality are expectable consequences of a human being's quest for spirituality. Engagement in such tasks, furthermore, is even evidence of the fact that the single individual is not presuming too much of God or of his or her own capacities. Finally, if one openly admits that, spiritually speaking, these ethical excursions are sinful, and are hence evidence of the fact that the human being is in constant need of God's grace, Kierkegaard would take such a concession as evidence that one is genuinely practising spiritual development (JP IV, 4234).

If one recognises that we should only expect the genuinely spiritual person to occasionally give in to ethical temptations, then one cannot say that Kierkegaard's doctrine of love and his theory of prioritising spiritual over ethical wellbeing will unconditionally result in an 'impotent' response to social inequality. Whilst it might be true that Kierkegaard's doctrine of love as an *ideal* preaches 'impotence' with regards to economic equality (given the host of caveats and conditions that we have outlined above), it would still not justify the claim that in *actual practice* (by temporal beings) the doctrine leads to a defence of bourgeois quietism.

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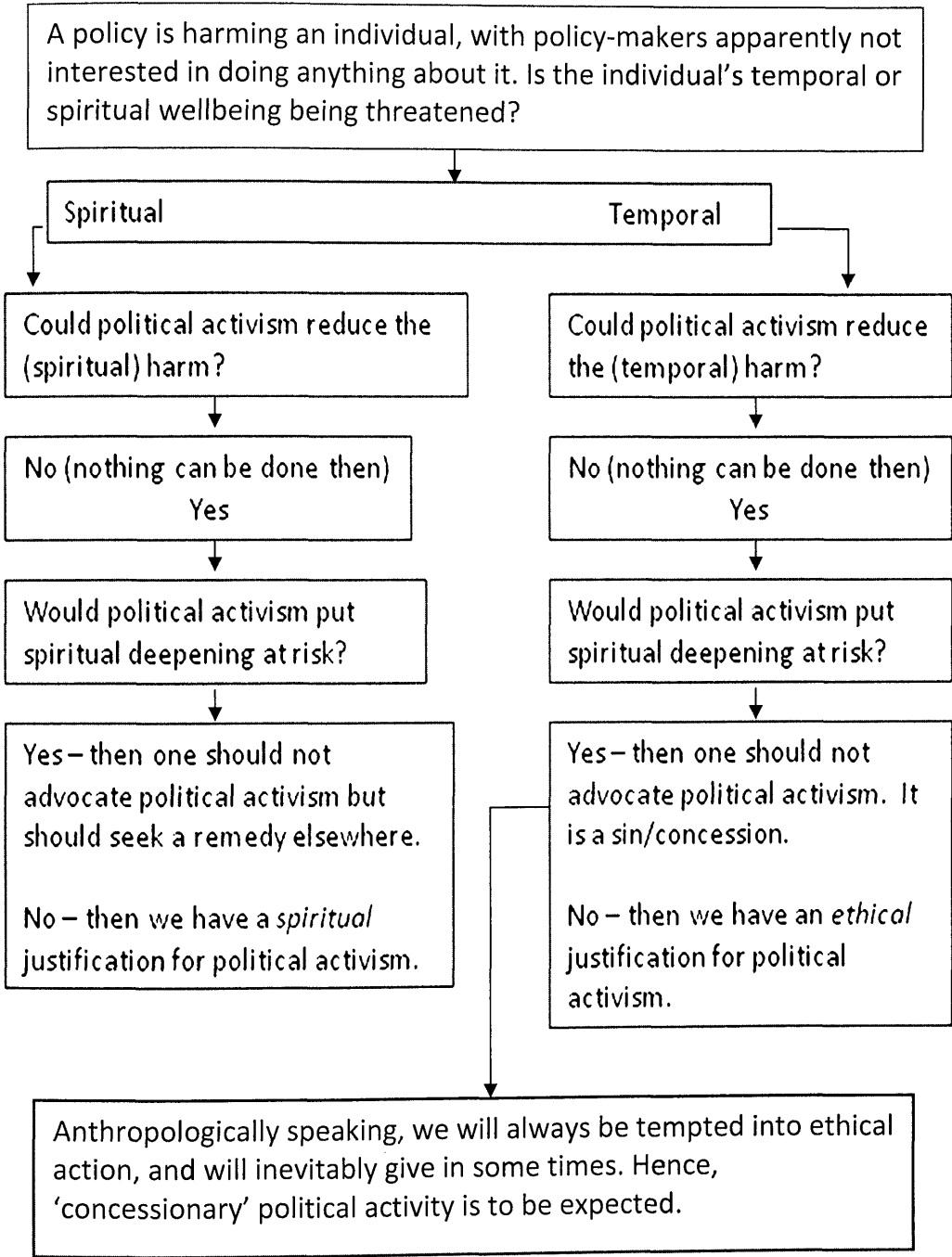
<sup>150</sup> In arguing this, I am aware that Kierkegaard clearly believes that the Christian life requires relating each and every one of one's actions with God in mind. The single individual cannot simply act Christianly in localised instances (JP IV, 4937). This would be 'double-mindedness' (see 'Purity of Heart', in UDVS [pp. 7-154]), and 'serving two masters' (UDVS, 205-08). My argument is that though 'concessionary politics' is, strictly speaking sinful, it is only natural to expect human beings to become tempted into sinful activities. Hence, we ought to expect concessionary political activity, even from spiritual individuals who seek to exemplify New Testament Christianity.

In responding to Adorno's claims, I recognise that there is much truth in some of Adorno's critical remarks about Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political. Kierkegaard's spiritual prioritarianism is a radically different way of theorising about the political. Nevertheless, I have no intention of removing the radically challenging nature of Kierkegaard's theory of the political. Reducing the revolutionary force of Kierkegaard could risk altering it to the extent that it ceases to be spiritual prioritarianism altogether. Spiritual prioritarianism necessarily strikes the 'natural man' (or, the person who does not endorse 'spiritual prioritarianism' at any rate) as radical. I think that Kierkegaard would want the radical nature of his doctrine to remain something to be reckoned with.

Without trying to tone down the profoundly novel and challenging characteristics of Kierkegaard's thought, nevertheless, I hope to have challenged some of Adorno's arguments. I have given additional justifications to the claim that Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political does not necessarily lead to 'impotence' with regards to external reform. I have also argued that the practice of Kierkegaard's spiritually ideal life still does not entail, or even recommend the complete abstention from economic and political concerns. Such concerns *can* be fundamentally tied in to a prior, spiritual commitment. Additionally, Kierkegaard's spiritual prioritarianism is implemented by partly temporal humans who could never possibly attain the level of spirituality that the spiritual ideal nevertheless demands. Hence, one cannot say that the real-world consequences of Kierkegaard's spiritual prioritarianism will be the level of abstention from socio-economic affairs that Adorno charges Kierkegaard's doctrine of love with necessitating.



**Figure 7.2.1** – Flow chart depicting Kierkegaard’s prioritarianism and its real-world implications



As the diagram above shows ['Figure 7.2.1'], there are two ways in which Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political might lead to external change. The first was examined in the previous chapter, and is a direct consequence of Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political. The second way in which Kierkegaard's thought might justify political change, however, is when his existential theory of the political is combined with his understanding of his anthropology. As imperfect individuals, as beings who inevitably make concessions for themselves and who are tempted into sin, Kierkegaard does not deny that humans will undertake political action of a 'concessionary' kind. Kierkegaard certainly wishes to warn against the spiritual jeopardy that over-indulgence in 'concessionary politics' can cause. Indeed, we have seen above (in chapters three and five) that Kierkegaard expends a great deal of effort in highlighting the spiritual damage that misinformed and overzealous political activism might incur. Kierkegaard is undoubtedly interested in making us become aware of the spiritual ramifications of our actions. Even still, I think it is only to be expected that even a spiritually-minded individual might engage in 'concessionary' political activism. This is a direct consequence of both Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political as well as his anthropology.

In conclusion, I hope to have shown that Kierkegaard's defence of a spiritual theory of the political is quite some way from being an intentional, self-serving, class-based defence of the status quo. Furthermore, I have argued that there is little in Kierkegaard's theory of the political that suggests that it necessitates political quietism and/or conservatism. In fact, our examination of one direct result of Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political, his attack on the Danish state-church

marriage (examined in chapter six above), was perceived at the time as quite radically *challenging* the bourgeois *status quo*.

Perhaps an atheistic Marxist will doubt some of the premises that are fundamental to Kierkegaard's thought; that we have a God-given, spiritual aspect, for example. My defence of Kierkegaard cannot go beyond a potential disagreement with his basic, starting premises. Kierkegaard might well view a Marxist atheist as sinfully turning his or her back on God by defiantly attempting to establish an ethical and political system that, from Kierkegaard's point of view, is ultimately immanentist and nihilistic.<sup>151</sup> The Marxist might, in return, see Kierkegaard as investing too much hope in the, what they would see as, delusory belief that that 'true' equality, spiritual equality, will be provided for in the afterlife by a beneficent God. I have only sought to show that Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political does not necessitate quite the level of political quietism that Adorno charges it with. Ultimately, it might well be that Adorno believes that more secular political activism is required than what Kierkegaard offers us; whilst Kierkegaard might blame this very attitude for causing a level of misery that far outweighs the temporal benefits of social equality. Kierkegaard might even believe that Adorno's well-intended social activism might even bring about more *temporal* turmoil than practising his own spiritually motivated theory of the political.

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<sup>151</sup> In fact, Kierkegaard turns the 'Marxist-inspired' critique on its head: he blames certain 'social and communistic movements' as encouraging a sociability that over-emphasises the temporal equality between human beings and is ultimately contrary to true sociality (see; JP IV, 4185, for example; cf. TA, 106). This 'lower' form of community (being based on temporal rather than spiritual equality) only leads to 'crowds' that ultimately stifles genuine sociability and pays insufficient respect to the dignity of persons. I will argue this point in more details shortly (see section 7.4 below).

Still, Adorno's highly influential criticism of Kierkegaard has another aspect to it. Adorno argues that Kierkegaard's doctrine of love, the backbone of the latter's theory of sociality, results in an instrumentalist way of viewing the other, and is thus inherently *anti-social*. Additionally, Adorno argues that since Kierkegaard does not pay sufficient attention to the worldly differences between individuals, Kierkegaard's vision of sociability fails to recognise, let alone respond to, worldly inequalities. This second aspect of Adorno's criticism of Kierkegaard's social and political thought will be the focus of the next sub-section.

7.2.2 Adorno's second critique: Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political leads to instrumentalist social relations and is thus is anti-social. Response – the relations between human beings are 'mutually informative', not 'instrumentalist'.

Adorno's charge that Kierkegaard is an 'individualist' re-iterates a claim that has been placed against Kierkegaard from as early on as his immediate contemporaries, to as late as our own. Typically, this charge goes hand in hand with seeing Kierkegaard as 'asocial' (or even 'antisocial'). Contemporary Kierkegaard scholars have identified, however, that Kierkegaard's thought contains both 'individualistic' and 'social' dimensions. How do we square these two claims? Furthermore, can we do so in such a way that will also refute Adorno's highly influential criticism of Kierkegaard's theory of the political as essentially individualistic? This will be our focus in what follows.

Firstly, I will dedicate the next sub-chapter to examining contemporary debates as to whether Kierkegaard's thought is primarily individualistic or social (7.3). Then I will give my own interpretation of some of the issues of these debates, as well as Kierkegaard's social theory, with the help of an examination of some crucial passages from Kierkegaard's journal entries (7.4). I hope to show that Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political does not involve instrumentalist or individualistic social relations. On the contrary, I will argue that Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political is a necessary condition for 'genuine' sociability.

### 7.3 The 'Kierkegaardian self'.

#### 7.3.1 The Kierkegaardian self: 'Individualist'.<sup>152</sup>

Merold Westphal, has recently argued that an overly social reading of Kierkegaard's thought risks deifying the kinds of temporal, communal values that Kierkegaard had expressly fought against. To counter the trend, Westphal interestingly asks scholars to take seriously Kierkegaard's subjectivism and individualism, for it is precisely here that Kierkegaard's social and political contribution is to be found. Thus, Westphal concludes his chapter 'Kierkegaard's Politics' by reminding us that '[...] Kierkegaard seeks to un-socialize the individual in order to un-deify society' (Westphal, 1992, 34: original emphasis).<sup>153</sup> Westphal's account argues that Kierkegaard's individualism was a corrective to the particular one-sided, communal based theory of politics that Kierkegaard's contemporaries espoused.

Many other scholars have argued that Kierkegaard's individualism is an essential part of providing a genuinely *social* theory. Mark Dooley emphasises that Kierkegaard's individualism allows the political and ethical individual to step back from his or her given social environment in order to make well-informed ethical and political

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<sup>152</sup> It is important to note that in the following section the term 'individualistic' denotes a methodology. René Descartes was not a sceptic but famously pursued philosophical scepticism in order to ground a theory of knowledge. In a similar manner, individualistic readings of Kierkegaard argue that he advocated a methodology where to become the kind of person who is suited for genuine sociability one must first undergo existential development, the latter of which requires a degree of solitary and personal ('individualistic') striving. In a similar manner, 'individualism' will refer to the combination of those philosophical commitments which emphasise separating the individual, in his or her existential striving, from social determinants.

<sup>153</sup> Elsewhere Westphal had argued that though Kierkegaard is an individualistic thinker, he is not a 'lonely' thinker (Westphal, 1980, 321).

decisions. Once more, in this case, the *individuated* subject is better equipped for *social* responsibility than the social conformist (Dooley, 1998, 139-40).<sup>154</sup> And Stephen Backhouse has recently argued, on similar grounds to Westphal, that:

[...] while it is true that Kierkegaard is a profoundly political writer with a deep concern for other human beings, it is also true that he remains an individualist. [...] Kierkegaard's individualism [however] offers a route to healthy inter-personal relationships and an alternative to the idolatrous deification of the nation or of the group [...] (Backhouse, 2011, 162)

Backhouse believes that it is only after the individual has worked through a necessarily individualistic God relation that he or she will be able to be truly social at all. Perhaps the quote above does not put the point across as well as when Backhouse later argues that: 'Authentic becoming is an inward process with an outward direction, for true communal relations can only exist between concrete persons, and not amorphous groups' (*ibid.*, 186).<sup>155</sup> Far from being antithetical to sociability, then, Kierkegaard's individualism is in fact a necessary condition for it.

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<sup>154</sup> See also: Dooley (2001, 43, 93-107). Mark Dooley's individual does not necessarily relate to 'God', however. For Dooley, the individual can relate to some other, secular goal. As long as he or she relates to something that transcends what is immediately given (i.e., his or her culture, biology, political situation, etc.) then he or she is afforded the necessary distance to authentically relate to any one of those givens in an existentially responsible manner. In fact, Dooley *prefers* to translate Kierkegaard's religious views into secular, political language (e.g., *ibid.*, 142, 144). Stephen Backhouse convincingly argues, however, that removing the religious aspect of Kierkegaard's political thought undermines the project itself (Backhouse, 2011, p. 25, n.124, and pp. 202-207).

<sup>155</sup> Søltoft makes a similar point: "In order, according to Kierkegaard, for the individual to 'feel at home' with others, [s/he] must first 'feel at home with him[her]self'" (Søltoft, 1999, 124). Though Søltoft later argues that: '[...] the personal relation of the individual to God can form the fixed point for the dizzy eye and thus be the source of the individual's renewed ethical relation to himself and to others' the primacy of the individual's relation to God is not argued for. In fact, the opposite appears to be the case. Søltoft correctly sees this process as a remedial procedure after what she takes to be the prerequisites for authentic existence – proper ethical relations and sociability – have been rendered unavailable or ineffective by social movements. I align myself more with Søltoft's position than the individualists, especially with the idea that the individual's relation to God is not *entirely* static. I shall soon critique Backhouse's 'individualistic' position on precisely these grounds (in sub-section 7.5).

For Westphal, Kierkegaard's individual first relates to God, then to 'others'. This specifically religious relation to the other is achieved by loving them as a neighbour. Though Backhouse argues this point as well (*ibid.*), he puts forward the further claim that the individual relates to God and then to *society*. For both thinkers, however, a relation to God is the first requirement for *any* form of sociability. For Backhouse, an individual's relation to God gives him or her an eternal focal point that transcends all social norms, and allows for a standpoint to be taken whereby those cultural norms can authentically be questioned and appropriated (or rejected). Since this God-relationship is both 'eternal' and equally available to all, its supposition marks a universal test for authentic appropriation of one's social background, and so for authentic selfhood and genuine sociability.

Bruce Kirmmse also advocates an 'individualist' reading of Kierkegaard. For Kirmmse, the individual relates *first* to God and *then* to a social or political issues.<sup>156</sup> (Kirmmse calls this political view 'prioritarianism'. See: Kirmmse, 1990b, 295, ff. See also: Mathew 6:24-34). Hence, Kirmmse argues that, for Kierkegaard, concerns with 'social and political responsibilities [...] must be seen as subordinate to the individual's relation to God' (*ibid.*, 295).

The 'individualists' positions can be backed up using quotes directly from Kierkegaard's signed works. In a journal entry, for example, Kierkegaard notes that:

[...] on the occasion of my new upbuilding discourses they will probably bawl out that [...] I know nothing about sociality. You fools! Yet on the

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<sup>156</sup> We highlighted Kirmmse's 'prioritarian' understanding of Kierkegaard's political outlook above (n.143).



other hand I owe it to myself to confess before God that in a certain sense there is some truth in it, only not as men understand it —namely, that when I have first presented one aspect clearly and sharply, then the other manifests itself even more strongly. [...] Now I have the theme of my next book: it will be called *Works of Love* (JP V, 5972).<sup>157</sup>

As Begonya Tajafuerce recognises: “One could say that this ‘other side’, ‘sociality’, is already implicit in a reading of the ‘first side’, i.e. ‘individuality’.”<sup>158</sup> Furthermore, the journal entry implies that Kierkegaard attempted to deal more directly with the concept ‘sociality’ in *Works of Love*. Thus, *Works of Love* could be read as Kierkegaard’s theory of sociality, following directly on from his earlier ‘individualistic’ works. Note once more, however, that the chronological order of Kierkegaard’s authorship – *first* individualistic writings, *then* a social theory – appears to faithfully represent the ‘individualists’ claim that one must *first* distance oneself from sociality in order to become an authentic self, before one can *then* become a social self.

In fact, *Works of Love* is often also used as evidence of Kierkegaard’s ‘individualistic’ theory of sociality.<sup>159</sup> For example, Westphal quotes from *Works of Love* where Kierkegaard writes that: ‘Ultimately, love for God is the decisive factor; from this originates love for the neighbor... the Christian love commandment commands loving

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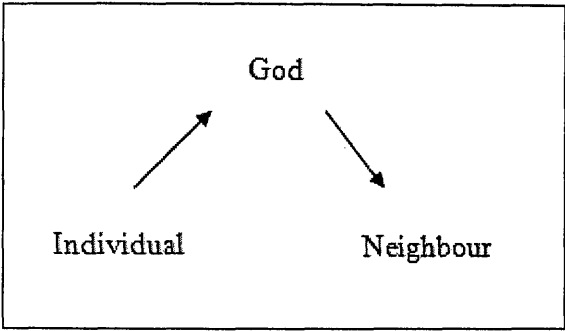
<sup>157</sup> Another important work in this respect is *Sickness Unto Death*. There Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous author Anti-Climacus argues that becoming a fully-fledged self requires first relating to the ‘power that established it’. Anti-Climacus explicitly links this ‘power’ with God (SUD: Part 2). See also TA, where Kierkegaard links the removal of the individualistic aspect of his thought to herd mentality: ‘Remove the relation to oneself, and we have the tumultuous self-relating of the mass to an idea’ (63).

<sup>158</sup> Tajafuerce (1998b, 62). Tajafuerce goes on to argue against this position, however, despite admitting that doing so is contrary to what Kierkegaard wrote.

<sup>159</sup> The textual evidence for understanding human relations as necessarily going through God *first* includes the following: WOL, 77, 121, 140, 149, 160; JP III, 2428. That God is described as the ‘middle term’ of human relationships is also stated in the following: WOL, 57-58, 67, 103, 106-07, 119, 121, 142, 303, 395, 437-39, 450; JP I, 595; JP IV: 4110, 4148. That God’s description as a ‘middle term’ need not imply an individualistic interpretation of Kierkegaard’s social thought, however, is highlighted by ‘mutually informative’ readings examined shortly below (7.3.3).

God above all else, and then loving the neighbor’ (WOL, 57).<sup>160</sup> Importantly, for Westphal’s account, the statement is literally read to imply the chronological order that one comes to love one’s neighbour: *first* God, *then* other. Westphal concludes from this that God is the *middle* term in a triadic relation. Diagrammatically, the account would look ‘Figure 7.3.1’ below:

**Figure 7.3.1:** The ‘Individualist’s’ account - Individual → God → Neighbour.<sup>161</sup>



The idea of a true love relationship being triangular is also found in Kierkegaard’s own words. In *Works of Love* Kierkegaard writes that: “The love-relationship is a triangular relationship of the lover, the beloved, [and] love- but love of God” (*ibid.*,

<sup>160</sup> Commenting on the relationship between the first commandment (‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind’) and the second (‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’), Westphal also concludes that the latter commandment is second in a *chronological* way too, precisely because it *relies* on the first (Westphal, 2004, 220. The biblical passage quoted is: Matthew 22:37-39). See also Westphal (2008, 37) where, contrasting Kierkegaard with Levinas, Westphal concludes that for Kierkegaard ‘[...] God always stands between me and my neighbor’.

<sup>161</sup> The term ‘other’ could be used here but it risks secularising Kierkegaard’s specifically religious term.

181). Nevertheless, Kierkegaard then goes on to express even stronger sentiments. On the same page he writes: "The world can never get through its head that God in this way [as a part of the triangular love-relationship] not only becomes the third party in every relationship of love but essentially becomes the only loved object" (*ibid.*). Such quotations have spurred anti-social readings of Kierkegaard's works such as Adorno's.<sup>162</sup> As we saw above, Adorno would take this quote to imply that according to Kierkegaard's doctrine of love, loving one's neighbour becomes merely an *instrumental* way of loving God.

### 7.3.2 – The Kierkegaardian self: 'Instrumentalist'.

As we briefly outlined above (e.g., at the end of section 7.2), Adorno argues that Kierkegaard's thought is essentially individualistic. Adorno claims that there is nothing inherently unique or even distinguishing about 'the other' when he or she is loved as a neighbour, according to Kierkegaard's theory. Kierkegaard advises us to ignore the temporal aspect of the 'other' and to love them for the eternal and presumably unchanging spiritual aspect that they partake in. The real object of love, Adorno concludes, is God; and hence the neighbour ultimately only simply serves as a medium for one's relationship to God (Adorno, 2002, pp. 9 & 11). The disregard for the actual, worldly conditions of 'the other', coupled with the seemingly only self-serving relation that the lover has with God whilst practising neighbour-love, has led

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<sup>162</sup> Instances where Kierkegaard suggests that one's love of God has priority, or that love of God is the ultimate end of all relations of genuine love, include: WOL, 19, 77, 121-22, 140, 149, 181, 264; UDVS, 129-130, (where one's relationship to God is argued as more intimate than one's relationship with one's wife[spouse/partner]), 335, JP III, 2428.

Adorno to call Kierkegaard's doctrine of love 'callous', and is taken as evidence of Kierkegaard's secret 'misanthropy' (*ibid.*, 16), his true 'hatred of man' (*ibid.*, 11).

This charge is probably the most influential criticism of Kierkegaard's thought that Adorno levelled, and versions of it are still found amongst contemporary scholarship. In fact, an examination of some of the contemporary articulations of what I shall call an 'instrumentalist' reading of Kierkegaard's doctrine of love will show precisely how influential Adorno's original criticism has been.

Knud Ejler Løgstrup is one of the most recent scholars to have shared in Adorno's 'instrumentalist' reading of Kierkegaard's theory of sociability.<sup>163</sup> The 'instrumentalist' reading is deeply challenging because it uses Kierkegaard's own text to support it. Part of Løgstrup's view is that Kierkegaard's Christianity, contrary to what Kierkegaard might have intended, ignores the ethical dimension of the neighbour completely. Summarising Løgstrup's view, Povl Götke writes that

To get the beloved to love God is the highest good indeed, since God is for the believer the only one who, strictly speaking, is worthy of being the object of concern. But this, to get the beloved to love God and not himself, demands of course that one distract the beloved's attention and love away from himself as the beloved and direct it toward God. Seen from a Christian perspective, one should [...] let everything be oriented towards God. (Götke, 1998, 232).

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<sup>163</sup> See for example: Løgstrup (1997, 218 onwards). Similar views as Løgstrup's and Adorno's has also put forward by Levinas - see: Søltoft (1998, 133-34).

Such words could have come from the writings of Adorno. Løgstrup's own 'instrumentalist' reading has dominated discussions of Kierkegaard's theory of sociability, especially Danish scholarship of *Works of Love*. In fact, in an article concerning the 'Recent Scandinavian Literature on Works of Love' Povl Götke outlines Løgstrup's instrumentalist reading of *Works of Love* before going on to assess what he simply calls the 'post-Løgstrupian history of reception' (Götke, 1998, 232).<sup>164</sup>

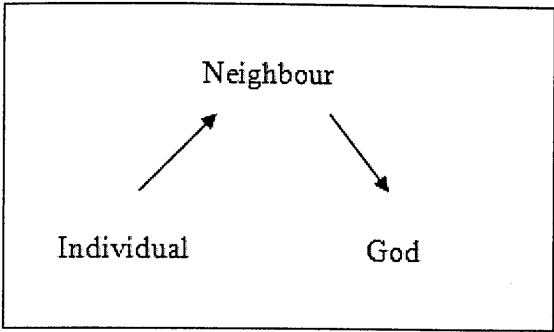
Løgstrup's view is a contemporary re-statement of Adorno's basic arguments. The neighbour is not loved for his/her own sake, but simply for the 'Godly' element that each person invariably contains within them. This appears to entail, as Løgstrup emphasises, that Kierkegaard's prioritarian treatment of spirituality involves undervaluing or even ignoring ethical interaction with the other. Kierkegaard, Løgstrup argues, advises us to oversee ethical facts about the other so that we can focus on the purely spiritual aspect of loving our neighbour.

Diagrammatically, an instrumentalist reading of Kierkegaard would be more akin to this:

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<sup>164</sup> Which includes the Kierkegaard scholars Bukdahl, Nordentoft, Muller, Malantschuk, and Grøn.

**Figure 7.3.2:** An 'Instrumentalist' account - Individual → Neighbour → God.



According to the instrumentalist reading, the relation to the neighbour is only a necessary means to one's individual and subjective relation to God. This is unlike the above case where God is loved for His own sake, *and then* the neighbour for theirs; for here, loving the neighbour is a mere means to loving God.

Even if we understand Kierkegaard's work to represent the relation shown in 'figure 7.2' above, however, we still might not have to read this as an 'instrumentalist' relation between the individual, the neighbour, and God. Louise Carroll Keeley, for example, appears to hold the above view when she writes that: 'Kierkegaard's conception of love divinely understood is formulated with geometric rigor: to love oneself is to love God; to love another is to assist that other in loving God; to be loved by another is to be helped by that other to love God' (Keeley, 1992, 100). Yet Keeley argues that the other is not loved *instrumentally* in order to love God. In fact, the relationship is described in the opposite way of Adorno and Løgstrup's

instrumentalism: loving God is itself the *side-effect* (though a necessary one) of truly loving the other as a neighbour. Keeley, and I think Kierkegaard, would undoubtedly agree with Løgstrup, et., al. that the very inclination to use the other as a means for establishing a relationship with God is both unethical and un-Christian. Yet Keeley highlights that loving the neighbour first and then God need not imply an instrumentalist relationship to one's neighbour. Instead, one genuinely loves the neighbour for his or her spiritual qualities and then *consequently* comes into a loving relationship to God through the same act.

In fact, both Adorno and Løgstrup's interpretation is challenged by the fact that at times Kierkegaard treats love for the neighbour and love for God as synonymous. In one place, for example, love between a lover and a loved is said to be conscientious only when '[...] *either* God *or* the neighbour is the middle term' (WOL, 142, my emphasis).<sup>165</sup>

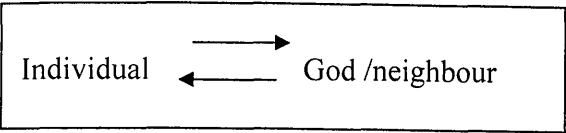
### 7.3.3 – The Kierkegaardian self: 'God' and 'other' as 'Mutually informative'.

If 'neighbour love' is *synonymous* with 'love of God', as Kierkegaard sometimes claims (WOL, 160, 161; JP III, 2434) then, diagrammatically, the relation is simply:

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<sup>165</sup> This point was brought to my attention by Ferreira (2009, 49).

**Figure 7.3.3:** A ‘Mutually informative’ account - Individual ↔ God/Neighbour.<sup>166</sup>



Loving the neighbour is inextricably tied with loving God, and vice versa. This reading goes against both the instrumentalist readings, but also the individualistic readings of Kierkegaard too. This is because the individualists, as I have called them, believe in the primacy of the individual’s relation to God, and *then* to the neighbour. In the ‘mutually informative’ interpretation of Kierkegaard’s doctrine of love, it is not the case that one must enter into a God-relation before in inter-personal relation. If the relation above was permitted (Figure 7.3.3), one could conceivably fully concentrate on loving one’s neighbour and still fulfil ones duty to God (and vice-versa).

<sup>166</sup> Scholars that appear to take this view include Stacey Elizabeth Ake (1998), and Sylvia Walsh Perkins (1995). Ake, for example, at one place writes that: ‘For Kierkegaard, then, love of God and love of persons are integrally connected; one cannot have the one without the other’ (1998, 188). Such a sentence does not seem to prioritise *either* one or the other chronological movement outlined in the interpretations above (i.e., from God then to Other [figure: 7.3.1], or from Other to God [figure: 7.3.2]). For a critique of the ‘mutually informative’ view of the relations between self, neighbour, and God, see Elrod (1981, 183), and Lee (2006, 93-94).



### 7.3.4 – The Kierkegaardian self: social *then* individual.

Regardless of which view of the self scholars hold, there is a further question of whether the individual is partly socially constructed or not. The question of whether one is a social being before an individual, or vice-versa, can therefore be raised.

In this sense, for example, Michael Plekon might be a scholar who holds to a 'mutually informative' idea of the relation between the *individual* and *society*. Plekon argues, for example, that Kierkegaard's writings contain '[...] a sociological focus which is inextricably entwined with his theology' (Plekon, 1981, 46). Elsewhere, Plekon argues the reverse of this relationship, namely that: 'Kierkegaard's theological optimism is essentially communal or social' (Plekon, 1992, 11). Finally, in describing the situation that the self is grounded in, Plekon notes the social and communal ties but neglects mentioning the individual's grounding to God, presumably because he believes that Kierkegaard's theological views permeate his social ones:

[...] the individual is always located or grounded within the confines of an array of relationships, ranging from those of the biological species to the social bonds of the family, church, and nation." (Plekon, 1982, 70. See also pp. 71 and 80).

Likewise, Robert Perkins argues that the insights derived from Kierkegaard's stance on ethico-religious subjectivity '[...] show that the ethics of religious inwardness is

laden with political consequences and insights' (Perkins, 1995, 174). For Perkins and Plekon, Kierkegaard's religious focus is part and parcel of his political and social insights, and vice-versa. But Perkins' conglomeration of Kierkegaard's religious and political positions leads him to think that Kierkegaard's writings espouse a great deal more emphasis on political matters than Kierkegaard would have cared for, himself most frequently being interested primarily in the religious and only secondarily and infrequently in the political. Perkins himself notices this disparity. After arguing that Kierkegaard ought to be placed '[...] on the side of those [for] whom the universal would provide an ideal model of the state and who demand and expect a humane and rational politics' Perkins directly follows on by recognising that: 'Such a conclusion would no doubt come as a surprise to Kierkegaard, for there is absolutely no indication that he drew this conclusion' (*ibid.*, 174).

Apart from arguing that Kierkegaard's religious views are inextricably entwined with his social thought, Perkins later argues that Kierkegaard's individual is also 'situated', culturally or historically. 'Whenever Kierkegaard writes about the outer, the political, the economic, or the social, he ponders how this flows out of human inwardness and how these various aspects of the age (any age) impinge upon the individual' (Perkins, 1999a, 177).

Daniel Conway takes this line of thought further by arguing that Kierkegaard's individual is in fact *inherently* situated. For Conway, Kierkegaard '[...] submits that prevailing social conditions always influence — indeed, make possible or not — the individual's quest for an authentic existence' (Conway, 1999, 26). According to Conway's reading of Kierkegaardian reflexivity, the individual must refer their

existential development to the incumbent social organizations. Thus, for individuals: 'The stamp of the age is thereby imprinted onto their very understanding of themselves [...]' (*ibid.*, 24).

In the writings of those who see Kierkegaard's individual as inherently situated, it would appear as if the very notion of radical individualisation is questioned. For if by 'individual' we mean some entity that can be completely separated from societal influences when engaging in relations with God or neighbour (as Dooley and Backhouse would seem to suggest – see 7.3.1 above), authors such as Conway would argue such a notion is actually un-Kierkegaardian.

#### 7.3.5 – Conclusions regarding the Kierkegaardian self.

One final aspect of Kierkegaard's doctrine of love should be mentioned. Adorno often accuses Kierkegaard of ignoring the particular qualities that help constitute who that person is. Adorno correctly identifies that for Kierkegaard, the term 'neighbour' has the Christian usage of referring to all human beings.<sup>167</sup> One's neighbour is, in a sense after all, anybody – the first person one encounters. In fact, Kierkegaard explicitly emphasises that no person *in particular*, nor any person's particularities, is the object of Christian love. Integral to Kierkegaard's notion of neighbour-love is the idea that it contains no grounds for partiality or for preferential treatment. Within the concept of

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<sup>167</sup> See also; WOL, 19, 49-52, 61, and 129.

the 'neighbour' then is the notion that no one person is to be loved more than any other, but all equally.

It should be noted, however, that in both Danish and English, the word 'neighbour' also has the connotations of an actual person in close proximity. The Danish word for 'neighbour' is *Næste* which can also be more literally translated as 'next'.<sup>168</sup> In the context of loving one's neighbour, Kierkegaard maintains both aspects of the term 'neighbour' - the general, Christian concept of any and every person (as constituted spiritually), as well as the local case of the single individual one encounters when performing *works* of love (with his or her psychical-physical particularities). As I argued above, one can only empathise, for example, from one single individual to another. That is to say, a spiritual or religious love of each single individual can and surely must be compatible with paying special attention to the concerns of the single individual one is empathising with. Empathy would not be possible if it was a matter of instrumentally using the other as a means of relating to God; nor if one practised empathy *on masse* with all humans simultaneously yet none in particular.

Furthermore, it could be argued that the entire point of Kierkegaard's work is to give preferential love an adequate grounding – not to eradicate it completely and replace it with the practice of neighbour-love instead. Hence, Kierkegaard does give an account of preferential love (friendship, marriage, etc.) that, he argues, is *compatible* with his doctrine of neighbour-love. The grounding of love of one's spouse ought to primarily be because he or she is a spiritual individual, a creation of God's, and(/or) a being

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<sup>168</sup> Hence, Kierkegaard scholars have often noted that after Kierkegaard emphasises practising 'blindness' with regards to the particular features of the neighbour (as a means of establishing genuine neighbour-love), he re-emphasises loving the particular neighbour that we immediately 'see' (see for example, WOL, 154-174, 269; for the scholarly literature, see Ferreira, 2001, 55-62; Keeley, 1999, 215; Lee, 2006, 97-99).

with the potential to become an authentic and spiritually harmonious single individual. Once that groundwork has been established, however, there is nothing that prevents one from also loving the psychical-physical qualities that are a vital aspect of one's friends or spouse.<sup>169</sup> Love based *solely* on these latter features will be precariously conditioned on the contingent fact of whether or not those qualities, as well as one's preference for them, remain the same. Kierkegaard's warning message is that these temporal qualities are in fact a lot more fickle than people think. Hence, friendship and love based solely on psychical-physical attraction risks becoming ruinous. In addition to this, the knowledge of the insecurity inherent within temporally-based relationships means that they will be defined by anxiety (*ibid.*, 40-43), and perhaps jealousy.

Nevertheless, a human being is partly temporal, and so affectionate preference for the psychical-physical aspects of another person is also an ordinary and probably inescapable aspect of human life. (Additionally, friendship and affection can be joyous aspects of life too. Recall above that Kierkegaard praised them as a blessed gift from God [n.149].) Kierkegaard merely wants to combine preferential love with neighbour-love, and hence secure the former from the inherent volatility that otherwise defines it.

Hence, there is nothing in Kierkegaard's doctrine of love that suggests that the contingent aspects of one's neighbour (their class or relative economic standing, for example) are ignored. In respect of grounding one's love for the other in neighbour-

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<sup>169</sup> Kierkegaard also uses the word *Nærmeste* (as a noun) ten times in *Works of Love* (and as a verb, five). *Nærmeste* literally means something like '*the next*' (emphasis added), but can also be literally translated as 'nearest'. Hence it is quite similar to the concept of 'neighbour' in that Kierkegaard gives it a Christian usage to mean loving 'any person' (i.e., whoever happens to be 'the next'), as well as a more particular manifestation of that love, by loving 'the next' person that one encounters.

love, they are not taken into account. But Kierkegaard's anthropology presses the fact that we are not completely spiritual beings. A flourishing human regulates his or her psychical-physical preferences by spirit but never attempts to extirpate the former, which would, in any case, be impossible. Hence, Kierkegaard's doctrine of love is fully compatible with pursuing relations that take into account the particular features of each person one expresses neighbour-love towards.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Other scholars who have argued that Kierkegaard's doctrine of love is defective because it treats the neighbour too abstractly, include George (1998 71-81), and Mackey (1986, 141-59).

#### 7.4 Kierkegaard: 'genuine' politics and 'genuine' sociability.

In providing some possible rebuttals to Adorno we have seen that there is good evidence to suggest that the neighbor is not merely loved as a necessary means to one's relation to God. Our examination of 'mutually informative', 'socially encumbered', and even 'individualistic' readings of Kierkegaard's doctrine of love highlighted many social aspects of Kierkegaard's view of the human self and of neighbour-love.<sup>171</sup> It is still not quite clear, however, whether this justifies calling Kierkegaard's thought a 'social' theory. Not all inter-personal interactions are 'social', let alone constitutive of a social theory. Furthermore, even if Kierkegaard does have a social theory, is it a good one? Or are there better alternatives? Finally, we have not yet tied Kierkegaard's spiritual theory of the political with his social thought. Are the two necessarily linked? Or does Kierkegaard happen to have both an existential theory of the political that emphasises becoming an individual, as well as an unrelated social theory as well?

In answering such questions, we will need to outline what Kierkegaard means by 'sociality'. In many journal entries Kierkegaard quite explicitly states that sociality is an 'animal' qualification (JP III, 2968, 2970; JP IV, 4126, 4231, 4234, 4341). By this, Kierkegaard means that the natural human desire for company and for others is a consequence of the fact that the human being is an animal, and specifically a 'social

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<sup>171</sup> All of the theorists examined above all, bar only Conway, Løgstrup, and Adorno accept that Kierkegaard's thought contains valuable insights to a social theory.

animal' (JP IV, 4231).<sup>172</sup> The desire for sociality therefore satisfies basic psychical and/or physical needs of the human. Such comments about sociality might appear to lend themselves to an individualistic understanding of the human. We might wonder why, for example, Kierkegaard does not ever say that we have a *spiritual* need to engage in the company of others. Furthermore, the 'psychical-physical' characteristics of sociality make it sound as if it is something that the spiritually individuated subject must ultimately separate him or herself from.

Given our examination of Kierkegaard in the preceding chapters, it should hopefully have become clear that, for Kierkegaard, there must be at least *one* sense in which we have a spiritual interest in sociability. For recall that according to Kierkegaard's basic anthropological view, the psychical and the physical aspects of the self must be regulated by the spiritual. Hence there should be a way for the spiritual aspect of the self to regulate sociability – despite the fact that the latter might originally only be determined by a psychical-physical need. Given that the spiritual must (always) regulate the psychical and the physical, a spiritual account of sociability must be possible. Whether Kierkegaard gives such an account is another question, and will be examined below. Even if Kierkegaard does not describe a spiritual basis for sociality, however, it would still follow from his anthropological commitments there must be a way of spiritually regulating the psychical-physical desire for community.

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<sup>172</sup> See also: JP IV, 4341, where Kierkegaard explicitly states that "[...] sociality is related essentially to the mind-body synthesis"; JP III, 2970 where Kierkegaard says that: "[...]the animal-definition of what it means to be a human being, corresponds exactly to the animal's notion of being safe when it is in a flock", and; "[...] 'the mass' [...] corresponds to the 'animal-man'"; and finally: JP III, 2968, where Kierkegaard says "Man is *by nature* an animal-creation. All human effort is therefore in the direction of running together in a herd [...]" (original emphasis).



As it happens, I believe that Kierkegaard does provide such a theory of sociability. Before looking at his view of true sociality, however, it is worth examining Kierkegaard's view of spiritually *unregulated* community. In fact, we have already touched upon a particular manifestation of ungenuine sociability above (Chapter five). We saw that one of Kierkegaard's defining characteristics of 'The Present Age' was that ethical action was rendered ineffectual. In the present age individuals either live amongst the numerical mass of human beings that Kierkegaard called 'the public', or else they extract themselves from the public. But we also saw that the numerical and oppressive force of the crowd led Kierkegaard to believe that being an individual in the present age can only be undertaken by one who has religious strength. In the present age, then, humans can either live socially in a psychical-physical, animalistic way, or in a spiritual way that entails suffering.

Perhaps this is a key to understanding Kierkegaard's view of genuine, spiritually regulated sociability? In his journal entries, Kierkegaard does speak of a 'lower', animalistic form of sociability, and a spiritually higher one. Furthermore, Kierkegaard dedicates much of the work *Two Ages* in describing the pernicious effects of having social relations that are only regulated by psychical-physical qualifications. When no individual person is spiritually regulated, when one only relates to others in a psychical-physical way, Kierkegaard argues that envy must ultimately ensue (cf., JP III, 2986). In such a situation, the practice of seeing each other person as an individual fit for spirituality, along with the recognition that his or her distinct psychical-physical characteristics are important but not wholly defining aspects of that person, is lost.

When the spiritual aspect of relations between single individuals is ignored, the only things that characterise the associations are psychical-physical features.<sup>173</sup>

Without the ability to respect each person as a spiritual being, individuals relate to others by way of the other's psychical-physical characteristics alone. Relations become defined by comparisons, and these in turn cause anxieties such as: 'Do the psychical-physical characteristics of the other or of the majority meet my standards? And are my psychical-physical characteristics the same as everyone else's?' In such a state, a recognition of basic human dignity (i.e., that each human is equally equipped for being a representative of the spiritual ideal) is ignored; people are *defined*, instead, in terms of psychical-physical qualifications alone. Deviating from the norm, furthermore, might inadvertently invite social ostracism, and so the desire for conformity can become forceful. Hence, in a situation where relations are built upon psychical-physical comparisons, envy best characterises the way that people who have not exercised spiritual individualism relate to others.

It is clear from both Kierkegaard's journal entries as well as his comments about sociality in the present age that this way of relating to others is the 'lower' form of sociality. I have also suggested that there must be a higher form of sociality, where the animalistic impulses for relationships with others are regulated by spiritual qualifications. Perhaps we will find Kierkegaard's view of genuine community by looking at the single individuals who, in the present age, are able to emerge from the process of levelling as authentic selves.

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<sup>173</sup> Surprisingly enough, Kierkegaard made conclusions regarding the need for 'spiritual reciprocity' in love [read: friendship also] as early as in 1837 (JP III, 2380, 2381).

One of the scholars examined above who takes an 'individualistic' reading of Kierkegaard's view of sociability has argued for such a claim. Stephen Backhouse argues that:

Truly authentic existence [is] predicated upon an encounter with other Christians, which implies a neighbourhood of believers. [...] Kierkegaard's suggestion is that *no one is an individual unless they are in a relation to this community*. (Backhouse, 2011, 221, original emphasis).

Perhaps there could be a society of religious people who each individually have the strength and courage to refuse to be governed by the psychical and physical aspects of the present age? Backhouse seems to believe so. In support of his claim, Backhouse argues that genuine sociability is dependent upon each single individual first becoming authentic. To become an authentic individual, in turn, it is necessary to go through the process of levelling. In fact, Backhouse argues that: '[...] it is only by going through the levelling process of the present age that the individual comes to have an apprehension of the authentically religious.'<sup>174</sup> Since leveling is required for an apprehension of the religious, and since 'no one is an individual unless they are in a relation to [a] community' of Christians [read: religious individual's], then it does appear as if the only way for a spiritually regulated community to form is by a society of those who have emerged through the process of levelling.

Nevertheless, I do not entirely agree with Backhouse's reading. Leveling, Backhouse argues, is a phenomenon which can affect any age, and here he might be correct. It is

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<sup>174</sup> I should also note that Backhouse uses the term 'levelling' [double-L-ing], where the standard translation of *Nivellering* is 'leveling' [one-L-ing]. I shall stick to the standard, if only to maintain the difference between Kierkegaard's term and the English term 'levelling'.

also important to bear in mind the varying *extent* to which leveling occurs in differing times, however. In some ages the leveling process is limited so that relating to others is still an ethical possibility (e.g., in the 'age of revolution', which was discussed above in chapter five). In other circumstances, however, Kierkegaard believes that the effect of leveling is so extensive that ethical action becomes ineffectual (e.g., in the 'present age' – also discussed in chapter five.) Finally, in his latest writings, Kierkegaard even advocates negative political reform as a possible solution to combatting the levelling process (chapter six). Backhouse's recognition that leveling is an ever-present phenomenon, coupled with his stress that one's individual relation to God is also fundamental, irrespective of time period, leads to an interpretation of Kierkegaard that is not reflexive enough of social and political changes. Hence, Backhouse appears to believe that the arguments that Kierkegaard had defended in 1846 are his final word on the topic of sociability (for example).

Backhouse's socially inflexible reading leads to a contradiction, however. Kierkegaard explicitly says that the people who have 'divinely understood the diabolical principle of the levelling process [...] will be *unrecognizable*' (TA, 107, original emphasis). Such 'unrecognizable ones' will be unable to 'give direct help, speak plainly, teach openly, [or] assume decisive leadership' (*ibid.*, 108). The closest to any sort of community these 'unrecognizable ones' have, apart from the fact that they each individually endure constant suffering submission to the process of leveling out of a love of humanity, is when Kierkegaard concedes that an 'unrecognizable one' *might* be able to 'suspect' a fellow 'unrecognizable one' of also having (or attempting to) overcome the leveling process. At best, however, they will have only a 'vague

idea' that a fellow contemporary is suffering in this way (*ibid.*, 109). Kierkegaard explicitly states, however, that *no* person could ever be sure of this:

But they [both those who are not fighting leveling and those who are, the preceding paragraph indicates] will not be certain [that another person is also fighting against the leveling process], because certainty could only come from him [the unrecognizable one who is fighting against the leveling process], and if he provides one single man with that [information] directly, it means he is dismissed, for he would be unfaithful to God and would be assuming authority, because he would not in obeying God learn to love men infinitely by constraining himself [...] (*ibid.*, 109.)

Given what Kierkegaard says about them, the prospect of a community of 'unrecognizable ones' appears untenable. In any case, this example of 'spiritual' sociality appears to be greatly at odds with the social theory that we examined in *Works of Love*. There it seemed as if it was a real prospect to love one's neighbour; not secretly by an act of suffering but quite openly through works of love.

Attention must also be brought to the fact that 'Works of Love' was written one year after *Two Ages*. Hence, despite the fact that Kierkegaard had specifically argued in the earlier work that 'works of love' would have no effect in the present age (or even have the adverse effects of being understood as pride/insolence: [*ibid.*, pp. 90/104]) Kierkegaard nevertheless authored a piece the following year in which arguing for the undertaking of (successful) works of love is the central focus. In order to explain this discrepancy (and as even a cursory examination of the former and latter text will highlight) Kierkegaard must be assuming a different kind of society in *Works of Love* than in the 'present age' of *Two Ages*.

I propose that in *Works of Love*, but not in *Two Ages*, Kierkegaard is describing a state of affairs where political and social entities are acting genuinely. I shall argue that it is only when genuine politics is practised that there can be a true community of individuals; as opposed to a 'crowd' or a 'public'. In an insightful journal entry, Kierkegaard spends great efforts at distinguishing a community from a crowd in multiple ways. Hence, I quote it at length:

In the 'public' and the like the single individual is nothing; there is no individual; the numerical is the constituting form [...]; detached from the 'public' the single individual is nothing, and in the public he is, more basically understood, really nothing at all. In community [*Menighed*] the single individual *is*; the single individual is dialectically decisive as the presupposition for forming *community*, and in *community* the single individual is qualitatively something essential and can at any moment become higher than "community" [...] In community the single individual is the microcosm who qualitatively repeats the macrocosm [...] In a public there is no single individual and the whole is nothing [...] Community is certainly more than a sum, but yet it is truly a sum of ones (JP III, 2952).

Kierkegaard quite clearly says that in order to form a true community (i.e., not just a crowd), the members must be single individuals. By 'single individuals' Kierkegaard means those individuals who have undergone spiritual deepening; not just individuals who are in some sense 'singled out' by psychical-physical qualities.<sup>175</sup> Hence a community based solely on the latter will not be a genuine community; and in fact will be a 'crowd', a 'public'.

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<sup>175</sup> In another informative journal entry about specifically religious communities, Kierkegaard extends this point: "[...] "the single individual" must have intervened[...] as the middle term in order to make sure that "community" and "congregation" are not taken in vain as synonyms with public, the crowd, etc.;[...Furthermore, the single individual's] relationship to God [determines] his relationship to the congregation [not the other way around]" (JP I, 595 – originally intended to be part of 'The Accounting' from *The Point of View*. See also: JP IV, 4110 ).

Now we can see why Kierkegaard's theory of the political, as well as his spiritual justification for negative policy change, is a necessary aspect of his social thought. For in conditions where the prospect of undertaking spiritual deepening and becoming a single individual is jeopardised, true community is also put at risk. Unless such a situation is rebutted, we risk entering a state where the only possibilities of social interaction are either an animalistic immersion in a crowd, or else religiously suffering as an isolated, single individual. In neither case is the 'genuine' social interaction of *Works of Love* possible; nor does it seem possible for a 'genuine community' in accordance with the definition in the above journal entry. Hence, the practice of genuine politics is a necessary condition for genuine sociability.

Furthermore, an analysis of some of Kierkegaard's scattered and short but nevertheless informative journal entries shows that no person can become an authentic self alone. These entries show that authentic spiritual development is necessarily inter-personal. Hence, these entries provide additional reasons for arguing that an instrumentalist or asocial reading of Kierkegaard's thought is untenable.

In one journal entry, for example, Kierkegaard quite explicitly states that a relation from one human to another, without God as a 'middle-term', is terrible (originally: "The reason why the world does not advance but goes backwards") (JP IV, 4148). This might at first seem to support an instrumentalist interpretation of Kierkegaard's social theory, for Kierkegaard says that God must be a 'middle' term. In other words, one must work 'through' a relationship with God before one can properly relate to another.

In a slightly later entry, however, Kierkegaard explicitly criticises what he perceives to be the 'instrumental' way in which individuals relate to each other in Christendom. Kierkegaard states that "To 'achieve actuality' also means [to be] willing to exist for every man, as far as one reaches" (JP IV, 4163). Limiting one's understanding of loving others to a Sunday sermon, however, implies a situation where "[...] every man as such has a certain relativity in which he lives; others do not essentially exist for him" (*ibid.*). This is strikingly similar to the instrumentalist's criticism of Kierkegaard's doctrine of love. In direct contrast to this, however, Kierkegaard continues on to write that "From a Christian point of view I do not have the right to ignore existentially one single man. I have the right to ignore an anonymous writer, to ignore the public and all such fantasies, but not [an] actual man" (*ibid.*). In other words, Kierkegaard first criticises the idea that we only relate to others in a relative, instrumental way, and then re-affirms his own view that we have an *absolute* duty to *never existentially* ignore one single human being. This entry therefore provides very strong, if not conclusive reasons for suggesting that Kierkegaard's own existentially-motivated commitments to the other would reject an instrumentalist relation altogether.

Whilst Kierkegaard suggests that we separate ourselves from being totally defined in terms of the traits that characterise a crowd - the psychical and the physical - this does not thereby imply that we ignore another fellow human - his or her temporal traits, or his or her existential (spiritual) wellbeing. On the contrary, each one of us has the task of maintaining a spiritual relationship with every other person. Undertaking this task, furthermore, is part of our *own* project of becoming an authentic self.



Another journal entry, chronologically later still, supports a mutually exclusive reading of Kierkegaard's theory of sociability. Kierkegaard states in quite simple terms that "Love to God and love to neighbour are like two doors that open simultaneously, so that it is impossible to open one without opening the other, and impossible to shut one without also shutting the other" (JP III, 2434). Hence, no person can genuinely engage in a relationship with God without also treating one's neighbour as a spiritual being in his or her own right. To treat 'the other' as a relative means to one's own God-relationship is a sinful engagement that is inherently destined to fail. Furthermore, this entry suggests that the attempt at becoming an authentic, spiritual being, an individual with a healthy relationship to God, must inescapably be joined with some kind of relation to the other. I suggest that the spiritual aspect of this joint endeavour will include practising works of love for one's neighbour(s). Once again, however, we must conclude that becoming an authentic self is an inter-personal affair.

#### 7.4.1 Concluding Remarks.

In conclusion, we have seen that for Kierkegaard we are part animals, and that as animals we have psychical and physical needs. The natural tendency towards sociability and preferential love is such a psychical-physical desire. Left spiritually unregulated, however, this desire becomes animalistic and is degrading to ourselves and to others, since the human being is capable of developing above and beyond mere psychical-physical characterisation. We might add that ungenuine associations appeal

to the psychological-physical aspects of human life which, as we saw above, are the most sensually pleasurable (3.3.1). Ungenuine sociality which is based upon psychological-physical characteristics alone might also serve as one more constant temptation for the individual into spiritual forfeiture.<sup>176</sup>

We have also seen, however, that socio-political institutions and their decisions can inadvertently affect the spiritual development of the typical individual found in those circumstances. When spiritual progression is affected to the extent that it is rendered unobtainable, and when non-political means are also an ineffectual remedy to these socio-political problems, then Kierkegaard's spiritual theory of the political justifies calling for negative policy change. Kierkegaard's ultimate goal is to enable individuals to progress spiritually. But this also implies enabling individuals to be the kinds of people that can constitute true communities, and become potential participants of genuine sociability.

Hence, I have argued that Kierkegaard provides a theory of sociability that is not only non-instrumental but that also seeks to treat other human beings as worthy of the dignity that they deserve. I have also argued that the possibility of being a truly sociable individual is one of the outcomes of Kierkegaard's spiritual theory of the political, and its existential justification of negative alterations to policy-decisions. Finally, an analysis of Kierkegaard's journal entries revealed that the individual's authentic spiritual development is a necessarily inter-personal and social enterprise.

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<sup>176</sup> Thus in another journal entry, Kierkegaard writes that: "All these pastoral conventions, general assemblies, societies, in short, all the sociality in our age, are [...] manifestations of the need for meaninglessness and immaturity [...]" (JP IV, 4126). A little later, Kierkegaard also argues that people create and maintain 'lower' forms of society because they do not want to be confronted with 'ideals' (i.e., ideal standards of spirituality) (*ibid.*, 4190).

## CHAPTER EIGHT:

### Conclusion.

The primary argument of this thesis is that Kierkegaard developed a theory of the political which is grounded in existentialist concerns. This central argument has been pursued in each and every one of the preceding chapters, in varying ways. In the opening chapter, I argued for a definition of a 'theory of the political' and distinguished the latter from other similar concepts such as a 'political theory'. In chapter two, I assessed some of the leading contemporary opinions of the literature on Kierkegaard's political thought. In this recent scholarship, many claims are made that I endorse throughout this thesis: that Kierkegaard does not present a positive programme for policy recommendations, for example. Building on these observations, I contributed a theoretical justification for this absence and demonstrated that rather than being an unintended flaw in Kierkegaard's writing, it is a necessary consequence of Kierkegaard's unique theory of the political. There was much in the recent scholarship that I questioned, however.

There were some philosophical positions in the contemporary Kierkegaard scholarship that I agreed with only after some qualifications have been admitted. It has been argued, for example, that Kierkegaard's thought lacks the essential ingredient of 'political and social activism' (Perkins, 1997, 154). From the

examination of Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political we see that this claim is only partially true. If by 'political activism' we mean fighting for political rights for their own sake and neglecting to consider the existential effects of our actions, then our analysis of Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political shows that, ideally speaking, 'political activism' of this kind is indeed condemned. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard endorses a different type of activism than this, an existentially-motivated political activism, which is combined with an existential interest in the development of others. This rather unique form of political activity was hinted at in *Two Ages* (chapter five), but became a central concept in *The Moment* literature (chapter six). Furthermore, it could be argued that Kierkegaard's theory of the political and his anthropology also provide us with reasons to expect the kind of 'concessionary' political activism that was examined above (7.2.1). Hence, the claim that Kierkegaard's thought lacks political activism is only somewhat correct.

Other claims from recent Kierkegaard scholarship were completely rejected, however. For example, I have sought to argue throughout this thesis that the claim that Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political is 'impotent' with regards to real-world changes (e.g., Adorno, 1989, 49-51; 2002; Fletcher, 1982, 71-2) is unfounded. Both the genuinely existential, as well as the 'concessionary' political activism that was mentioned immediately above, can be seen as evidence against these claims. Whilst the contemporary scholarship on Kierkegaard's political thought was outlined in the second chapter, I considered my relation to this literature only later on in the thesis when the majority of Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political had been outlined (6.3.1).

The textual evidence for Kierkegaard's theory of the political is provided in two distinct ways. Firstly, three bodies of texts from Kierkegaard's authorship were examined because they explicitly outlined Kierkegaard's categorisation of 'political' and 'non-political' entities, as well as detailed how the two ought to relate to each other (chapter three). These three works were signed in Kierkegaard's own name and tie in with many of his central interests especially, of course, his basic existentialist commitments. Therefore, I consider the views expressed in these three works to be Kierkegaard's own theory of the political (i.e., not a pseudonymous viewpoint; I outlined my reasons for taking these claims to be Kierkegaard's own, as well as my general method for interpreting the authorship, in section 7.1.1.2).

Aside from the explicit articulation of his theory of the political, however, I also argued that the former informs many key concepts throughout Kierkegaard's authorship. I backed this claim up by taking close, political readings of three of Kierkegaard's diverse works: *From the Papers* (chapter four), *Two Ages* (chapter five), and *The Moment* writings (chapter six).

I argued that the first work, *From the Papers*, closely examined the relationship between the socio-political conditions of a specific time period, and an individual that is deeply, existentially affected by those conditions, Hans Christian Andersen. Ultimately, I claimed that the central argument of the work, the aesthetic critique of Andersen, fails. This failing of Kierkegaard's aesthetic critique could, however, be taken as evidence that Kierkegaard had not thoroughly worked out a comprehensive and coherent philosophical system. As Julia Watkin has argued, *From the Papers*, like much of the authorship that preceded the publication of *Either/Or*, could be seen as

evidence of Kierkegaard 'experimenting' with concepts and literary devices that become vital aspects of his later, comprehensively worked out philosophical thought (Watkin, 1990, vii; see also: Westfall, 2006, 47). I suggested that evidence of Kierkegaard's early interest in the relationship between the socio-political movements of an age and the existential development of its typical individual is found early on in Kierkegaard's authorship, in *From the Papers*.

This interpretation opens up multiple interesting readings of *From the Papers*. In this thesis, for example, I pursued a *political* reading of *From the Papers* (4.3). The implications of reading *From the Papers* as an early, exploratory work in theorising about the political is that it enables us to see Kierkegaard's ensuing pseudonymous works as ways of portraying various impoverished existential life-views. A political reading of *From the Papers*, in conjunction with the existential theory of the political that is developed in Kierkegaard's signed authorship, opens up the possibility of finding out the extent to which the existentially impoverished pseudonyms might also be typical products of existentially harmful socio-political phenomena. A political reading of *From the Papers* also suggests that Kierkegaard might have been interested in examining the relationship between the socio-political and the existential in the entirety of his authorship. I hope to have helped open the way for such a reading. I could not have hoped to pursue the full ramifications of interpreting Kierkegaard's authorship in this way within the restraints of this thesis, but I hope to have encouraged future research in this area.

If the analysis of *From the Papers* provided us with a case study of a particular person (Andersen) in a particular age, the work *Two Ages* examines what kinds of existential

ramifications will affect the person *typically* encountered in a later, different age. There is a noticeable change in the socio-political conditions that backdrop the two works. I have argued that Kierkegaard responds to these (and elsewhere, other) externalities by shifting the focus of his theory of the political, his understanding of his existential, authorial task and responsibility, and the advice he gives to his reader about his or her existential development. This change highlights the fact that Kierkegaard's thought in general, and his theory of the political more specifically, is responsive to external changes in socio-political conditions. This in turn reveals that Kierkegaard is not as politically quietist as has often previously been thought.

In the work *Two Ages*, Kierkegaard focusses on the effects that an age will have on the 'typical' person. In doing so, Kierkegaard compares and contrasts one age with another. Our analysis of Kierkegaard's comparison shows that socio-political alterations can actually have a rather dominating effect on the existential development of the individual to the extent that following one of the three typically Kierkegaardian 'ways of life' becomes a pointless venture (5.2). The fact that Kierkegaard recognises this is additional evidence that he was acutely aware of the significance that socio-political factors have with regards to existential concerns.

In response to the unique conditions of the 'present', 'aesthetic' age, we saw that Kierkegaard began outlining his view of justified political activism. In *Two Ages*, the conditions are so extreme that existentially motivated political activism involves suffering at the hands of the numerically strong and dispassionate majority. Despite the fact that the type of existential, political activism described in the work might represent an extreme form of it, *Two Ages* nevertheless begins Kierkegaard's

involvement with the question of justified political activism. Generally speaking, any justified, existentially motivated political activism will put the single individual in opposition with (numerical) forces that undoubtedly cause some (temporal) discomfort to the activist. If *Two Ages* expressly articulated the possibility of existential activism, it also distinguished this activism from purely political activism – the latter being an attempt at securing civic liberties in order to serve a non-spiritual interest in the temporal wellbeing of the majority. Kierkegaard warns us that an over-engagement in the latter might even cause further existential impoverishment. This important distinction should serve as a constant reminder, then, that Kierkegaard's *existential* theory of the political enforces specifically existential limitations on an involvement with political issues in general (and political activism more specifically).

I interpreted *The Moment* literature as a case study of Kierkegaard's theory of existential activism. Hence, I judged the campaign for disestablishment that Kierkegaard pursued in the work as an example of existentially justified political activism. Furthermore, *The Moment* literature outlines additional conditions that Kierkegaard gave for defending such activism. Kierkegaard explicitly states that actively fighting for political change should only be encouraged when the spiritual development of the individual is put at more risk by failing to act than by standing out and protesting. Furthermore, political activism is only endorsed when other possible methods of helping one's fellows have been exhausted (such as Kierkegaard's own authorial activity).

Finally, *The Moment* literature shows that Kierkegaard is not completely averse to suggesting negative policy alterations. Whilst Kierkegaard might not leave us with a



positive programme for policy-implementation, he does outline the conditions for genuine existential activism. Hence, Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political provides a theoretical justification for fighting against certain illegitimate government actions and policies. As such, I argue that one cannot claim that Kierkegaard's theory of the political is 'quietist', or 'impotent' with regards to external change.

In the final chapter, I analysed Theodor Adorno's central criticism of the inherently individualistic nature of Kierkegaard's thought. Adorno had also claimed that Kierkegaard's individualism implied a theory of the political that was impotent with regards to external action – namely, to alleviating economic and social inequality. As I have interpreted Kierkegaard, the concern for the economic wellbeing of one's fellow human beings is primarily an ethical concern. Thus, I understand Adorno's criticism to be connected with Kierkegaard's constant priority of the spiritual wellbeing of the neighbour over their ethical or temporal wellbeing. I responded to this criticism by showing once more that according to Kierkegaard's anthropology, an ethical interest in the economic wellbeing of one's fellows is not necessarily cancelled out by a spiritual interest in the neighbour. Furthermore, it is only natural for us to expect human beings to engage in what I called 'concessionary' political activism (7.2). Ultimately, however, Adorno is correct in claiming that Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political is primarily committed towards the spiritual wellbeing of each human being, and only to economic (Kierkegaard might say 'temporal') wellbeing secondarily.

Adorno's second principal objection to Kierkegaard is that the latter has no true social theory.<sup>177</sup> Kierkegaard's spiritually ideal human, Adorno argues, fails to pay sufficient attention to the particularities of his or her contemporaries. Relations in Kierkegaard's social ideal are hence characterised by each single individual using the other as a medium for potential communication with God. The particularities of the person one relates to are thought to be irrelevant and are possibly even distractions to one's God-relationship, which has ultimate priority. Hence, Adorno claims that according to Kierkegaard's view, we are encouraged to ignore the particularities of our fellows, and this includes their socio-economic status in society.

In response to Adorno's argument, I highlighted that for Kierkegaard social relations ought to be *grounded* upon, but not limited to, spiritual reciprocity. Contrary to Adorno's reading, Kierkegaard does not believe that spiritual reciprocity will be the only defining factor of social relations between beings who are partly spiritual, partly temporal. Once the genuinely social person recognises the essential, spiritual worth of each of his or her neighbours (and for Kierkegaard, the Christian concept of neighbour-love is the most ideal form of this), those relations can also include shared interests and commitments that might be largely based upon temporal differences and similarities.

Furthermore, I argued that an instrumentalist reading of the relationship one has with one's neighbours is untenable. Far from being a viable means to one's God-relationship, treating the other in this way will only distance oneself from God (and is therefore, strictly speaking, a sin for Kierkegaard). 'God' and 'neighbour' are

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<sup>177</sup> This claim has been reiterated, for different reasons, by other contemporary scholars, e.g., Conway ("[...] he [Kierkegaard] offers nothing resembling a coherent, fully articulated social theory" (1999; 22)).

sometimes interchangeable concepts in Kierkegaard's authorship. Hence, an instrumental relation to one's neighbour necessarily implies an inauthentic relation to God.

Finally, I presented an alternative picture of Kierkegaard's view of the self, and of his or her authentic relationship to God and to others. In fact, we saw that existential development necessarily required pursuing healthy social engagements with others. Only when one loves his or her neighbour *as* neighbour (and then as a specific individual) can one potentially develop into the spiritual and existential ideal that Kierkegaard believes Christianity desires of each human being.

This account of the self and sociality links Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political with the vision of genuine sociability that he portrays in *Works of Love*. For genuine sociality requires existentially developed individuals. Individuals must first arrive at a religious understanding of the other as an essentially spiritual equal before genuine sociality can become possible. But Kierkegaard has also highlighted how socio-political actions can negatively affect the existential development of the person. If the existential development of the individual is jeopardised by 'ungenuine' policies, then genuine sociability is also endangered. Hence, in works like *Two Ages*, we see the direct link between the existential impoverishment that an 'age' can inadvertently foster, and the inauthentic and seriously deficient social relations that might occur as a result of the former.

All this is to say that Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political perfectly informs a vision of genuine sociability. Furthermore, we have seen how Kierkegaard's

existential theory of the political can justify political activism that pressures policy-change. Hence, I have argued that Kierkegaard outlined a rather comprehensive, existentially motivated theory of the political.

I have also argued that Kierkegaard's theory of the political is: systematically laid out; detailed; consistent throughout the authorship (and with key concepts within Kierkegaard's philosophy); and finally, that it is non-trivially responsive to external change. The 'spiritual prioritarianism' that underlies Kierkegaard's theory of the political (/social) might be perceived by some contemporary scholars, Kierkegaard scholars and non-Kierkegaard scholars alike, as quite 'radical'. Nevertheless, I hope to have shown that the radical nature of Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political is a direct consequence of the ground-breaking presuppositions that were developed throughout Kierkegaard's original authorship.

To what extent Kierkegaard's existential theory of the political might inform contemporary political debates is a question that I could not hope to answer in this thesis. I hope, nevertheless, that this thesis inspires future research into this area.<sup>178</sup> I would urge any future scholarship in this area to remember that Kierkegaard's social and political views, as with all aspects of his thought, keep his existential interests at the fore. This existential element makes Kierkegaard's theory of the political both wonderfully novel, uniquely informative to contemporary methods of theorising about the political, and ineludibly challenging. Whilst I have primarily sought to have contributed to Kierkegaard scholarship, this thesis also seeks to inspire research into contemporary political and philosophical debates. I hope to have facilitated further

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<sup>178</sup> Alison Assiter's rather recent book *Kierkegaard, Metaphysics and Political Theory: Unfinished Selves* makes a good start in this direction (Assiter, 2009).

research into, for example; how an existential theory of the political might be developed and applied in our contemporary situation; how theorising about the political in this intriguing and novel way might challenge and/or inform contemporary political debates; and whether an existentially-based theory of the political might be a preferable and feasible, or substandard and impractical, alternative to mainstream, contemporary theories of the political.

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**End.**