Kierkegaard's Later Critique of Political Rationalism

3,977 words

Søren Kierkegaard is a famous critic of rationalism, though less well known as a critic of *political* rationalism. It might have surprised Kierkegaard to learn that posterity would not appreciate his political theory. As the bread riots of 1847 crescendoed towards the Märzrevolution, Kierkegaard records in his journal, "It all fits my theory perfectly, and I dare say it will come to be seen how exactly I have understood this age."[1] Few scholars seem to regard this as much more than an idle boast. What theory is Kierkegaard talking about?

Kierkegaard's understanding of "the age" appears in his *Two Ages: A Literary Review*, published in 1846. In this book, Kierkegaard offers a critical view of public "reasoning," and describes a political age that lacks the passion for decisive action.[2] The dawning 'present age' breaks from the "theocentric" and "speculative" nineteenth-century, which concerns Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus in the more famous *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.[3] As Kierkegaard would journal amidst the revolutions of 1848, "Everything that looked like a religious movement became politics."[4] In *Two Ages,* Kierkegaard's critique of rationalism shifts, becoming more directly political.

Kierkegaard's earlier critique of rationalism in his mostly pseudonymous writings (sometimes called his 'first authorship') is only political by extension: it is mainly focused upon

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[1] Søren Kierkegaard, *Papirer*, I-XI, eds. P. A. Heiberg, V. Kuhr, and E. Torsting, (Copenhagen: Gylendal, 1909-1948), VII, A 84, n.d. 1847. Hereafter Pap.
[2] Søren Kierkegaard, *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 103. Hereafter *Two Ages*.
[3] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, Vol. 1, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 16.
[4] Søren Kierkegaard, Pap. IX, B 63, n.d. 1848.

rationalism in theology. Kierkegaard is especially annoyed by Hegelian theologians' expansive conception of reason.[5] In *Fear and Trembling*, for example, his pseudonym Johannes de Silentio attacks the Hegelian doctrine that political institutions, laws, and practices contain some kernel of rational 'actuality.'[6] Kierkegaard emphatically rejects the notion that following the norms of a given society, even those universalized as Kantian maxims, automatically situates the Christian in right relation with God. Using Abraham as an example, *Fear and Trembling* defines the 'religious' as a category that puts the individual higher than the universal.[7] Kierkegaard spent his life, with increasing intensity, wedging apart the 'religious sphere of existence' from perfunctory participation in the state church (which he called "Christendom").

However, in the winter of 1845-46, Kierkegaard began to formulate a critique of political life that no longer invoked the justifications of rationalist theology. His critique of theological rationalism neared completion in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, after which Kierkegaard planned to retire to the quiet life of a country pastor.[8] At the same time, though, Kierkegaard was embroiled in a nasty public dispute with the Danish political magazine *Corsaren* (commonly called "The Corsair Affair"). It caused Kierkegaard to think anew about the political public sphere as an obstacle to religious existence.[9] He concludes that the age requires a direct critique of public reasoning, the task of *Two Ages*.

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[5] See William Desmond, *Hegel's God: A Counterfeit Double?* (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2003), 206; Cyril O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), 345.
[6] See for example G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel: Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, ed. Allan Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 20.
[7] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Howard V. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 70.
[8] Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 412.
[9] Bruce Kirmmse, "Kierkegaard and 1848," *History of European Ideas* 20.3 (1995): 173.

Two Ages is a critique of 'political reasoning,' or of a communicative public sphere that "guarantees rationality."[10] More broadly, Kierkegaard is a critic of political rationalism that defends the (potential) rationality of political endeavor and political reflection.[11] Nowadays the nineteenth-century public sphere is sometimes identified, retrospectively, as the birth of political rationalism in this sense. For example, Jürgen Habermas's well-known *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* argues that the love and inclusive notions of humanity cultivated in the bourgeois intimate sphere generate the basis of a new political rationalism.[12] For Habermas, the nineteenth-century public sphere represents a "communicative domain" of formal and informal channels of rational criticism or critical publicity.[13] On this view, newspapers and novels are broadband media that shape inclusive sentiments and foster political reasoning about the welfare of all.[14] However, reporting from the birth of this new public sphere, Kierkegaard complicates our understanding of it.

'A literary review' may seem like an unlikely genre for political theory. *Two Ages* is (at least initially) a review of a Danish novel, anonymously written by Thomasine Gyllembourg,

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[10] The early Habermas offers the most famous articulation of a critical concept of the public sphere that at least guarantees rationality in principle. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 238.

[11] For this definition of political rationalism, see Peter J. Steinberger, "Rationalism in Politics," *American Political Science Review* 109.4 (2015): 750-763.

[12] Later, Habermas would seek new grounds for political rationalism, leading him to develop his theory of communicative action in the 1970s. Habermas also regarded this communicative domain as a fragile one, soon to be coopted by managed opinion and manufactured publicity. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 46-47, 48, and 56.

[13] See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 246-248.

[14] Historian Lynn Hunt has argued that the origin of human rights discourse should be located in these reading publics. Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007).

entitled, *A Story of Everyday Life*. But Kierkegaard argues that the literary reviewer does not address a political opponent, but rather, "an age, a reading public."[15] Literary criticism is a natural medium to raise the problem of historicism. Kierkegaard intervenes to defend the older author of *A Story of Everyday Life* from the "incredible cruelty of the young" (his own cohort, in fact) who speak "in the name of the age."[16]

What attracts Kierkegaard to *A Story of Everyday Life* is its reflection of political times in the lives of two individuals. Both are women who are extended members of the Wallers, a family of Copenhagen merchants. The revolutionary upheaval of the 1790s is reflected by Claudine's passionate love affair with a dueling Frenchman, Lusard. Decades later, the Vormärz status quo is reflected in Mariane's patiently suffering the hesitations of her beloved Ferdinand, whose money considerations keep him from marriage. Both Claudine and Mariane remain steadfast in love; Kierkegaard writes, each is "faithful to herself."[17] Thus, Claudine does not repent of her youthful enthusiasm for her French lover, who goes off to war. Mariane, likewise, remains patient in her unrequited love for the money-conscious Ferdinand. The two ages produce men who are different kinds of lovers, but the women are constant. According to Kierkegaard, the author would persuade "his" (in fact, her) readers that 'the demands of the times' are a distraction from the real business of life—"the pain and suffering and peril of one's life are not

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[15] *Two Ages*, 9.

[16] Kierkegaard's motivations are a little more complex. He wishes to offer a superior criticism of the work than the authorial preface in order to defend the author, as a man experienced with the mud of the street is crestfallen to see "a young girl" unsuccessfully avoid being splashed by a carriage (ibid., 60). Thomasine Gyllembourg, the "young girl" in this case, is the mother of Kierkegaard's rival P. A. Heiberg, to whom he sent two copies of his glowing review as well as *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, in order to provoke a response. Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 358.

[17] *Two Ages*, 30.

always where the shrieking is."[18] Kierkegaard thinks of politics as an esthetic realm of spectators with ever-changing temporary concerns, distracted from ethical concern with their own characters. But Kierkegaard was not only turning a cold shoulder to political trifles. In the 1840s, Danes were debating the abolition of slavery in the Danish West Indies—a day which finally came on July 3, 1848. Of all Kierkegaard wrote in this period, and for all he inspires Richard Wright, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Cornel West in the next century, there is not a sentence about slavery and emancipation.[19]

In his retelling of *A Story of Everyday Life*, Kierkegaard emphasizes not only how politics impedes and distracts from real passion, but also how political concerns mask deeper psychological motives. Gyllembourg's novel invites Habermas's critical reading public to reflect self-critically upon its own operations. For example, when the attorney Dalund (who is Mrs. Waller's lover) defends the permissive ideals of the revolutionary age, it is only out of envy of the libertine Frenchmen and as a self-justification for his relationship with his friend's wife.[20] Later Ferdinand, who is "carried away with the bold possibilities life offers," gives any number of reasons for not marrying. But like the present age as a whole, behind his public reasons is simply weakness: he lacks the passionate strength, Kierkegaard writes, to actualize any higher ideal.[21] His all-too-typical desire for money, for instance, is aroused by the possibilities that it

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[18] *Two Ages*, 7 and 20.
[19] Kierkegaard's nemesis of this period, N. F. S. Grundtvig, who led a revival of the Danish church that embraced liberal politics, was a leading abolitionist. Nigel Hatton, "Justice the Carribean: Transfer Day and the Political Philosophy of Frederick Douglass and Søren Kierkegaard," conference paper presented at the American Political Science Association Annual Conference, 31 August 2017. For Kierkegaard's influence on Wright, King, and West, see the respective entries by Jennifer Veninga, Hatton, and Marcia C. Robinson in *Kierkegaard's Influence on Socio-Political Thought*, ed. Jon Stewart (London: Ashgate, 2011).
[20] *Two Ages*, 47.
[21] *Two Ages*, 52.

signifies of any number of better lives.[22] *A Story of Everyday Life*, through the lens of Kierkegaard's criticism, unmasks the psychological motivations underneath the pretense of public reason.

The weakness and hypocrisy of the political statements in *A Story of Everyday Life* supplies the grist for Kierkegaard's long critique of the present age, an excrescence longer than the review itself. This selection of *Two Ages* has been translated and published separately (notably into German by Theodor Haecker in 1914, which partially explains the uptake of Kierkegaard by Weimar-era critics of political rationalism).[23] Kierkegaard dismisses the exchange of reasons in the public sphere as mere talkativeness, chatter, or chit-chat [*snakke*], supervening psychological paralysis. The "whole age" becomes "a committee," unable to act decisively (Carl Schmitt repurposes this aphorism) but ruthlessly stifling individuality, passion, and excellence.[24] The present age demands no passionate commitment, and in fact it tolerates no passionate commitments. Kierkegaard argues that the age is characterized by an amorphous envy, a "negatively unifying principle" that degrades excellence and "takes the form of leveling"

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[22] *Two Ages*, 75.

[23] Leo Strauss suggests that Kierkegaard's popularity in this period had to do with a crisis of faith in liberal democracy. Kierkegaard was not only popular among right-wing figures; Karl Jaspers, notably, appealed to him as well. Peter Gordon has recently emphasized the importance of Kierkegaard to Theodor Adorno. Leo Strauss, "An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism," *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 39. Peter E. Gordon, *Adorno and Existence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 1-36. See also Allan Janik, "Haecker, Kierkegaard, and the Early Brenner: A Contribution to the History of the Reception of Two Ages in the German-speaking World," *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Two Ages*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 1984); Heiko Schulz, "A Modest Head Start: The German Reception of Kierkegaard*," Kierkegaard's International Reception: Northern and Western Europe*, ed. Jon Stewart (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2009), 346–47.

[24] *Two Ages*, 79. Cf. Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), 62.

(Martin Heidegger takes over the term).[25] The participants in political life "shrewdly transform themselves into spectators."[26] They read and discuss the press hounding whatever victims of the news cycle, but do not feel any responsibility for the harms inflicted thereby. Public opinion is a giant, influential abstraction.[27]

The Revolutions of 1848 are not truly revolutionary, Kierkegaard argues (long before Marx came round to the idea). Unlike *real* revolution, the mediated political realm demands no passionate commitment. Kierkegaard compares the press to an ownerless dog—no one is responsible when it hurts anyone—and the public to English lords betting on the fall of a man riding an out-of-control horse.[28] The exchange of reason in the public spheres is mere talk, or chatter, supervening real motives of middle-class envy.[29] Members of the newspaper-reading public may encourage a bread riot, but never risk their lives for it.[30]

In contrast to both the revolutionary and the present age, Kierkegaard adumbrates a normative model for social life.[31] He describes a community united by common objects of love,

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[25] *Two Ages*, 81 and 84. Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996), 119.
[26] *Two Ages*, 72.
[27] See Gordon D. Marino, *Kierkegaard in the Present Age* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2001), 18.
[28] *Two Ages*, 105.
[29] One might say that Kierkegaard anticipates the concerns about 'emotivism' that Alasdair MacIntyre voices in *After Virtue*, although MacIntyre sharply criticizes Kierkegaard's concept of a "criterionless choice" of taking up an ethical life. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, third edition (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 41-45. For a nuanced defense of Kierkegaard that insists the choice of the ethical is telic, but which admits some force of MacIntyre's critique, see Gordon D. Marino, "The Place of Reason in Kierkegaard's Ethics," *Kierkegaardiana* 18 (1996): 49-64.
[30] Kierkegaard's journals evince a hatred of the press that can verge on the conspiracy. For example, he claims that the press governs by intellectually-spiritually "buttering up" the middle class. Søren Kierkegaard, Pap. X, A 690, n.d. 1850; Pap. VII, A 134, n.d. 1847.
[31] M. Jamie Ferreira, *Kierkegaard* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 119.

albeit in a particular way:[32] "When individuals (each one individually) are essentially and passionately related to an idea and together are essentially related to an idea, the relation is optimal and normative."[33] There is "ideal distance" because each possesses their passion individually, which Kierkegaard compares to harmonious music. (It echoes Augustine's Ciceronian description of "musical" concord in a city, where different orders of society are "balanced by reason as though they were voices").[34] Collapse the commitments of *each and all* to the ideal to simply *all*, and riotousness ensues—a revolutionary age walks this knife's edge.[35] In Kierkegaard's more serene political ideal, these unspecified ideas are eternal, and could motivate a single individual at any time.

What does it mean to reason [*at raisonere*]?" Kierkegaard asks, and answers, "It is the annulled passionate disjunction between subjectivity and objectivity."[36] For dispassionate, talkative reasoners, everything is open to criticism, and they lack the passion to stamp their subjectivity with 'objective' ideas. Thus a Ferdinand lacks a Claudine's moral character and remains formless, Kierkegaard writes, like the sea.[37] Kierkegaard describes the present age as a "dialectical tour de force: it lets everything remain but subtly drains the meaning out of it."[38] The monarchy is not abolished, for instance, "but if little by little we could get it transformed into

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[32] The image is basically Augustinian. See Oliver O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 25.
[33] *Two Ages*, 62.
[34] Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 77.
[35] *Two Ages*, 63 and 21.
[36] *Two Ages*, 103.
[37] *Two Ages*, 77-78.
[38] *Two Ages*, 77.

make-believe, we would gladly shout, 'Hurrah for the king!'"[39] In the politics of the present age, citizens languidly reason away their obligations.

How does the present, reasoning age arise? Characteristically, Kierkegaard does not provide an analysis of technological or social history, but offers a psychological explanation: envy. According to Kierkegaard, most people experience the world through esthetic categories:[40] most of us are selfish, sensual, desirous of possibility, skeptical, and escapist. The political reinforces the esthetic against the ethical, because citizens typically direct accusations against others rather than (ethically) against themselves.[41] Envy, then, is the other-directing psychological *cause* of the present political age: it causes citizens to doubt one another, prevents citizens from enthusiasm, and traps society in reflection.[42] Kierkegaard is neither the first man of wealth, nor the first Christian, nor or the first Socratic to argue that the envy of the crowd threatens the extraordinary individual.

The speculative enthusiasms of a revolutionary age having run their course, and with the abstraction of public reasoning to conceal commonplace envy, the present age emerges. Like the "the barbarism of reflection," the terminal stage of Vico's cycle of regimes, Kierkegaard describes citizens trapped in reflection as enervated, weak, and egotistical.[43] Politics offers an

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[39] *Two Ages*, 81.
[40] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 43.
[41] Kierkegaard describes "two changed persons who in a new misunderstanding continue their association, each as the accuser of another, instead of each one accusing himself and finding understanding." *Two Ages*, 7.
[42] *Two Ages*, 82.
[43] Although Kierkegaard is describing a nineteenth-century historical phenomenon, the rise of the press public sphere, some basic contours of this critique of political rationalism are a century older. See Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968), §1106; Cf. Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 104.

escape from eternal questions and self-responsibility into constantly changing temporary goals. "[L]eveling is powerful with respect to the temporary," Kierkegaard writes, and "reflection is a snare."[44] The public sphere as a whole is a formless sea of envy, its "negatively unifying principle" that dissolves individuality.[45] Kierkegaard warns of Baudrillardian consequences:

> [W]hen a man essentially puts his whole personality into communication… eventually human speech will become just like the public: pure abstraction—there will be no longer be someone who speaks, but an objective reflection will gradually deposit a kind of atmosphere, as abstract noise that will render human speech superfluous, just as machines make workers superfluous...[46]

Kierkegaard goes on, warning that even love and education would become depersonalized and technical pursuits, which do no longer require passionate commitments from individuals. The modern subject evaluates and criticizes everyone but herself, interested only in imagining the possibilities that they represent.

This critique of political reasoning in *Two Ages* seems at first to have little in common with Kierkegaard's earlier critique of theological rationalism. One need not be a 'Hegelian speculator' to be a spectator in the political public sphere. But the two critiques are perhaps connected, at least in a looser sense. Kierkegaard's "optimal and normative" political community requires sharing admirable ideals that are asphyxiated in a more general way by the modern philosophical temperament.

Post-Cartesian philosophy embarks on a quest for certainty that demands knowledge of efficient causes for how political ideals, or anything else, comes to exist. Like his hero Hamann, Kierkegaard argues that reason is powerless to answer such questions: we can only reason about

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[44] *Two Ages*, 89.
[45] *Two Ages*, 81.
[46] *Two Ages*, 103.

what we first experience.[47] In *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus makes a famous protest that reason [*Fornuft*] is out of bounds in modern thought: one cannot "reason in conclusion to existence," one can only "reason in conclusion from existence."[48] Ancient philosophy that begins in wonder (or admiration) could begin from existing opinions or phenomena, but modern post-Cartesian philosophy can only doubt the arbitrariness of these 'points of departure.'[49] (Hannah Arendt, who was concerned with tracing the disappearance of the Roman and Christian concept of universal authority from the modern world, called Kierkegaard's the "deepest interpretation" of Cartesian doubt).[50] Later Kierkegaard carries his polemic further. *Envy* is the passion that is the opposite of wonder that supplies modern philosophy's motivation to doubt.[51] The present political age does not require a specific speculative justification, but we may suspect that Kierkegaard believes there is a deeper influence of the attitude of modern philosophy upon the present political age. If it does not abet the present age, at least the philosophy that would resist the leveling public sphere had begun to collapse centuries before.

Ultimately, Kierkegaard is less concerned with the origins of the present age, and more concerned with developing an exit strategy. He wishes to develop a way to jolt citizens out of the

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[47] An important latter-day critic of political rationalism, Isaiah Berlin, draws our attention to this line of argument that chastens the scope of Enlightenment reason. Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 354.
[48] Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 40.
[49] Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 145.
[50] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 275 n32.
[51] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 146n. See also Robert Wyllie, "The Discourses on Wonder," *Søren Kierkegaard Newsletter* 64 (2015): 7-18.

mode of public reasoning, and into ethical and religious existence, spheres of life that afford the passionate ideals which unite communities. Kierkegaard brusquely rejects the notion that a more systematic political philosophy is needful: "Instead of all these hypotheses about the origin of the state, etc., we should be more occupied with the question: given an established order, how can new points of departure be created religiously?"[52] Kierkegaard recommends silence and suffering as points of departure, and his second authorship would make the imitation of the suffering Christ a major theme.[53] However, at least by example, he offers poetry, literature, and literary criticism as points of departure as well. *A Story of Everyday Life* can bring us to see our reflection, and the reflection of the age in Dalmund or Ferdinand. Although Kierkegaard later strikes a more apocalyptic tone, there is a silver lining:

> For the younger person, however firmly he adheres to what he admires as excellent, who realizes from the beginning that leveling is what the selfish individual and the selfish generation meant for evil, but what can also be the point of departure for the highest life, especially for the individual who in honesty before God wills it—for him it will be genuinely educative to live in an age of leveling. In the highest sense contemporaneity will develop him religiously as well as esthetically and intellectually, because the comic will come to be radically evident. For it is extremely comic to see the particular individual classed under the infinite abstraction…[54]

Likewise, in an 1848 letter, he writes of his hope that what appears to be a political age, a vortex of empty and endless desires, of envy of what others only appear to possess, will rediscover the need for the religious.[55] Unlike "Christendom," the age of speculative enthusiasm, and the revolutionary age, the present age cannot appear serious to those who understand its contours

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[52] Søren Kierkegaard, Pap. X, A 72, n.d. 1851.
[53] *Two Ages*, 98 and 109.
[54] *Two Ages*, 88.
[55] Søren Kierkegaard, *Letters and Documents*, trans. Heinrik Rosenmeier (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 262.

and honestly desire to live ethically or religiously. Here, for once, the melancholy Dane was all too optimistic.