

Kierkegaard's Later Critique of Political Rationalism

Søren Kierkegaard is a famous critic of rationalism in philosophy, but less well known as a critic of political rationalism. It might have surprised him to learn how little he is appreciated as a political theorist today. As the bread riots of 1847 crescendoed towards the Märzrevolution, Kierkegaard wrote 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 appear to regard this as more than an idle boast. What ‘theory of the age’ is Kierkegaard talking about?

Kierkegaard's account of “the age” can be found in his *Two Ages: A Literary Review*, published in 1846. It presents a critical view of public “reasoning” in a political age that lacks the passion for decisive action.² Like Michael Oakeshott's critique of rationalism in politics, Kierkegaard arraigns the “the *enemy* of authority” who weighs public arguments “fortified by a belief in ‘reason’ common to all mankind.”³ However, the specific “rationalist” assumption that politics is a domain of technical expertise, so irksome to Oakeshott a century later, is still on the horizon in the 1840s. Kierkegaard sees only the dawn of an age of political ideology.⁴

Kierkegaard journals amidst the revolutions of 1848, “Everything that looked like a religious

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer I-XI*, eds. P. A. Heiberg, V. Kuhr, and E. Torsting (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1909-48), 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 Michael Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” pp. 5-42, in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1991), 6.

⁴ It is also the twilight of the “theocentric” (early) nineteenth century. 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.

movement became politics.”⁵ Accordingly, Kierkegaard pivots from his better-known critique of rationalism in theology to a more directly political critique of rationalism.

Kierkegaard’s earlier critique of rationalism in his mostly pseudonymous writings (sometimes called his ‘first authorship’) is only political by extension: it focuses mainly upon rationalism in theology. Kierkegaard is especially annoyed by Hegelian theologians’ expansive concept of reason.⁶ In *Fear and Trembling*, for example, his pseudonym Johannes de Silentio attacks Hegel’s doctrine that political institutions, laws, and practices contain some kernel of rational ‘actuality.’⁷ Kierkegaard emphatically rejects the idea that following the norms of a given society, even those that can be universalized like Kantian maxims, puts Christians in right relation with God automatically. Indeed, rationalizing that one is a Christian simply by virtue of conforming to social conventions is, for Kierkegaard, a great obstacle to the life-changing conversion which faith demands. Using Abraham’s binding of Isaac as an example, *Fear and Trembling* defines the ‘religious’ as the category that raises the individual above the universal.⁸ Kierkegaard spent his whole life driving a wedge between mere participation in the state church and the true ‘religious.’ But his analysis of the obstacle to the religious underwent an important change in 1846.

As the critique of theological rationalism in the ‘first authorship’ neared its completion in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard planned to retire to the quiet life of a country

⁵ Pap. IX, B 63, n.d. 1848.

⁶ 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.

⁷ The doctrine is summed up in the Hegelian motto, “What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational.” G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel: Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, ed. Allan Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 20.

⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Howard V. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 70.

parson.⁹ However, at the same time, he became embroiled in a nasty public dispute with the political and literary magazine *The Corsair*. It started when literary critic P. L. Møller, an editor of the magazine, criticized Kierkegaard's 1845 book *Stages on Life's Way*. Kierkegaard fired back *ad hominem*, claiming that Møller cared only to curry the favor of the Copenhagen elite. In response, *The Corsair* lampooned Kierkegaard for the first several months of 1846. The "Corsair Affair" seems to have caused Kierkegaard to consider the public sphere itself as an obstacle to religious existence.¹⁰ He took up this problem in *Two Ages*.

Two Ages is a critique of political rationalism in a broad sense, or the view that political endeavors and political reflection are at least potentially rational activities.¹¹ Even Oakeshott rates as a "political rationalist" in this broad sense, since he insists that it belongs to practical reason to be conversant with belief- and value-based traditions of political discourse.¹² Of course, Oakeshott targets political rationalism in a narrower sense, namely, the view that politics reduces to universal and transmissible empirical knowledge for technical experts. Kierkegaard, however, attacks the rationality of political endeavors, at least in the present historical period. Outstripping Oakeshott,¹³ Kierkegaard insists that reasonableness in modern, mediated political discourse only veneers a deeper psychology of passionate conflict.

⁹ Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 412.

¹⁰ Bruce Kirmmse, "Kierkegaard and 1848," *History of European Ideas* 20.3 (1995): 173.

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

¹² Oakeshott calls these traditions sufficient "to persuade but not to prove." Michael Oakeshott, "Political Discourse," pp. 70-95, in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1991), 80.

¹³ Steinberger argues that Oakeshott's approach is "profoundly consistent" with the broad 'post-Kantian' sense of political rationalism he defends: a "conception of human reason understood as a socially located process of rational reconstruction." Peter J. Steinberger, "Rationalism in Politics," *American Political Science Review* 109.4 (2015): 750-763, 759.

What I have called the ‘broad’ and ‘narrow’ (or Oakeshottian) definitions of political rationalism ought to be held separate. Spinoza offers an exemplary disjunction. The political techniques in the *Political Treatise* are based on a universal and transmissible science of irrational, conflicting passions described in the *Ethics*.¹⁴ Spinoza is no political rationalist in the broad sense; he turns to non-rational passions to explain political behavior. Yet Spinoza is a political rationalist in the narrow Oakeshottian sense, because he purports to offer practitioners universally valid political techniques with a theoretical, scientific basis. Kierkegaard is not a political rationalist in any sense of the term. Anticipating today’s agonist and neo-realist critics of political rationalism, Kierkegaard argues that the apparent rationality of political discourse in the present age is a sham.¹⁵

The birth of the nineteenth-century public sphere is often identified as a watershed in rational politics, ideally representing an open-access political community where anyone’s ‘force of reason’ can sway public opinion and affect government policy. Jürgen Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* argues that inclusive notions of humanity cultivated in the bourgeois intimate sphere generated the basis of a new rational politics.¹⁶ For Habermas, the nineteenth-century public sphere represents a “communicative domain” of formal and informal channels of rational criticism or critical publicity.¹⁷ Broadband media like

¹⁴ Baruch Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Baruch Spinoza*, 2 vols., ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

¹⁵ Chantal Mouffe, whom I take to be a representative agonist, bucks the “rationalistic framework” by arguing that that politics is a matter of “collective passions” mobilized against adversaries. Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2005), 60 and 102-3.

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 246-248.

newspapers and novels shaped inclusive sentiments and political reasoning about the welfare of all.¹⁸ However, one artifact of this new public sphere, Kierkegaard's report in *Two Ages*, complicates our understanding of the new communicative domain. It may make us skeptical of the very idea of a communicative public sphere that "guarantees rationality."¹⁹

Two Ages is (at least initially) a review of a Danish novel, anonymously written by Thomasine Gyllembourg, entitled *A Story of Everyday Life*. A literary review may seem like an unlikely genre for political theory. However, Kierkegaard argues that reviewers do not address a political opponent, but instead an entire "age, a reading public."²⁰ Literary criticism is then an apposite medium to question the consensus of a particular time, and to make a historically bounded critique. Skeptical of the intellectual fashions that have come in with his own cohort, and which valorize participation in public life, Kierkegaard intervenes to defend the older author of *A Story of Everyday Life* from the "incredible cruelty of the young" who speak "in the name of the age."²¹

What attracts Kierkegaard to *A Story of Everyday Life* is its reflection of political times in the lives of two individuals. Both are women in the extended Waller family of Copenhagen

¹⁸ 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).

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ *Two Ages*, 9.

²¹ 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.

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."²² Claudine does not repent of her youthful enthusiasm for her French lover when he leaves her to go to war. Mariane, likewise, remains patient in her unrequited love for the money-conscious Ferdinand. The two ages produce two different kinds of male 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 always where the shrieking is."²³ Kierkegaard thinks of politics in the present age as an esthetic realm of spectators with ever-changing temporary concerns, distracted from ethical concern with problems of love and personal commitment. While the men engage in war and commerce, the women that remain steadfast in love are where the real action is.

In his retelling of *A Story of Everyday Life*, Kierkegaard emphasizes not only how politics can distract from real passions, but also how political concerns can mask deeper ulterior motives. 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.²⁴ 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 the public reasons he gives for his actions

²² *Two Ages*, 30.

²³ *Two Ages*, 7 and 20.

²⁴ *Two Ages*, 47.

is Ferdinand's weak character: he lacks the passionate strength, Kierkegaard writes, to actualize any higher ideal.²⁵ His all-too-typical desire for money, for instance, is aroused because signifies any number of better possible lives.²⁶ *A Story of Everyday Life*, through the lens of Kierkegaard's criticism, unmasks psychological motivations that belie the reasons characters give publicly.

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 among Weimar-era critics of political rationalism.²⁷ Kierkegaard dismisses the exchange of reasons in the public sphere as mere talkativeness, chatter, or chit-chat [*snakke*] that supervenes psychological paralysis. The “whole age” becomes “a committee,” unable to act decisively (Carl Schmitt repurposes this aphorism), that stifles individuality, passion, and excellence.²⁸ The present age demands no passionate commitment; in fact, it does not tolerate them. Kierkegaard argues that the age is characterized by an amorphous envy, a “negatively unifying principle” that degrades excellence and “takes the form of leveling” (Martin Heidegger

²⁵ *Two Ages*, 52.

²⁶ *Two Ages*, 75.

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ *Two Ages*, 79. Cf. Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), 62.

takes over this idea).²⁹ The participants in political life “shrewdly transform themselves into spectators” who feel no responsibility for the events they read about.³⁰ While they clamor for newspaper exposés, they do not feel responsible when the press hounds and smears the victims of the news cycle. For Kierkegaard, modern pieties like ‘transparency’ and ‘informed citizenship’ are the self-deceptions of resentful tabloid readers, who just want to see others torn down. Public opinion is a great abstraction that immunizes them from moral censure or ethical self-reflection.³¹

Kierkegaard’s theory of the age makes him cynical about political debates in the Danish newspapers, but not all of them were transitory entertainments for a resentful tabloid audience. 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 the concepts he furnishes Richard Wright, Martin Luther King, Jr., Cornel West, and others to describe the absurdity and despair of living in racist societies, there is not a sentence in Kierkegaard’s vast corpus (diaries included) about slavery and emancipation in his day.³² For all we may grant to Kierkegaard’s unmasking of the ‘reasoning public,’ he fails to recognize the urgent political issues right in front of him, in his newspapers. Yet his cynicism about the politics of *the present age*, however exaggerated, is not tantamount to a rejection of politics *in any age*.

²⁹ *Two Ages*, 81 and 84. Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996), 119.

³⁰ *Two Ages*, 72.

³¹ See Gordon D. Marino, *Kierkegaard in the Present Age* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2001), 18.

³² Kierkegaard’s nemesis 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)

Although Kierkegaard is sometimes maligned as an anti-social thinker concerned only with individuality, his attack on the “public” is not an attack upon social or political life, but upon the historical phenomenon that he observed divorcing the world of speech from the realm of action. Like Alasdair MacIntyre (otherwise a great critic of his),³³ Kierkegaard criticizes the possibility of political rationality under present historical circumstances, where reasoned debate only supervenes emotional conflict. In Kierkegaard’s public sphere, one wishes to be seen displaying fine opinions, or to be heard making witty remarks on the topic of the day, as an end in itself. Unlike the Greek citizen in the *agora*, who must act upon his words, Kierkegaard’s spectator lacks the intention (or “passion”) to do so.³⁴ Kierkegaard compares the press to an ownerless dog—no one is responsible when it hurts someone—and the public to English lords that wager on if and when a man riding an out-of-control horse will fall.³⁵ Members of the newspaper-reading public do not feed the hungry, in Kierkegaard’s unflattering portrait, but rather preen to announce their sympathy with the starving, or scour to find someone to blame for famine, or spur on bread riots.³⁶ Though it may have dangerous consequences, reason-giving in the public sphere is mere chatter that supervenes real motives of middle-class envy and rivalry for reputation. Thus the Revolutions of 1848 are not truly revolutionary, Kierkegaard argues

³³ 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.

³⁴ A similar lament can be found in Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2005), 12ff. and 110.

³⁵ *Two Ages*, 105.

³⁶ 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 “battering up” the middle class. Pap. X, A 690, n.d. 1850; Pap. VII, A 134, n.d. 1847.

(long before Marx comes round to the same conclusion) because they lack passion. Unlike *real* revolution, the mediated political realm demands no passionate commitment.

What does it mean to reason [*at raisonere*]?" Kierkegaard asks, answering, that reason "is the annulled passionate disjunction between subjectivity and objectivity."³⁷ Dispassionate, talkative reasoners leave everything open to criticism: in other words, they lack the passion to take up any 'objective' ideas that stamp their subjectivity. Thus a Ferdinand lacks a Claudine's moral character and remains formless, Kierkegaard writes, like the sea.³⁸ Kierkegaard describes the present age as a "dialectical tour de force: it lets everything remain but subtly drains the meaning out of it."³⁹ The monarchy is not abolished, for instance, "but if little by little we could get it transformed into make-believe, we would gladly shout, 'Hurrah for the king!'"⁴⁰ The politics of the present age is not a politics of passionate upheaval, because citizens devalue everything except their own opinions. Kierkegaard criticizes the politics of an age that cannot act upon its ideals, or which lacks ideals entirely.

In contrast to both the revolutionary and the present age, Kierkegaard does briefly adumbrate a normative model for social life.⁴¹ He describes community united by common objects of love, albeit in a particular way:⁴² "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."⁴³ There is "ideal distance" because each possesses their passion individually, which Kierkegaard compares to harmonious music. (He echoes Augustine's

³⁷ *Two Ages*, 103.

³⁸ *Two Ages*, 77-78.

³⁹ *Two Ages*, 77.

⁴⁰ *Two Ages*, 81.

⁴¹ M. Jamie Ferreira, *Kierkegaard* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 119.

⁴² 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.

⁴³ *Two Ages*, 62.

Ciceronian description of “musical” concord in a city, where different orders of society are “balanced by reason as though they were voices”).⁴⁴ Collapse the commitments of *each* and all to the ideal to simply *all*, and riotousness ensues.⁴⁵ Revolutionary ages flirt with this danger. Uncouple ideas from passionate action, however, and one is snared in the endless reflection of the present age.⁴⁶ In Kierkegaard’s ideal political theory, these unspecified ideas (or ‘springs of ideality’) are eternal, and could motivate a single individual at any time.

To explain the sudden emergence of an age obsessed with politics, Kierkegaard offers a psychological explanation rather than an analysis of technological or social history. Barriers to envy, he thinks, have broken down. According to Kierkegaard, most people experience the world through esthetic categories:⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹ Politics offers enviers an escape;

⁴⁴ Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 77.

⁴⁵ *Two Ages*, 63 and 21.

⁴⁶ *Two Ages*, 89.

⁴⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 43.

⁴⁸ 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. Like Vico’s “barbarism of reflection,” the terminal phase of the cycle of regimes in *The New Science*, Kierkegaard describes citizens trapped in reflection as enervated, weak, and egotistical. 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; Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 104.

⁴⁹ *Two Ages*, 82.

instead of interrogating the base motives that make them pick up the newspaper, citizens fling themselves at ever-new transitory goals. The public sphere is a formless sea of envy, this is its “negatively unifying principle” that dissolves individuality.⁵⁰ Everyone cares about the same things, at least for a news cycle. “[L]eveling is powerful with respect to the temporary,” Kierkegaard writes, and “reflection is a snare.”⁵¹ Kierkegaard warns of the 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...⁵²

Kierkegaard goes on, warning that even love and education would become depersonalized and technical pursuits, which no longer require passionate commitments from individuals. We will criticize everyone except ourselves, and evaluate only what others can do for us.

This critique of political reasoning in *Two Ages* seems at first to have little in common with Kierkegaard’s earlier critique of theological rationalism. Spectators in the public sphere need not be speculative ‘Hegelians.’ The abstraction of public reason is conjured negatively, as nobody trusts any other, or any higher, ideal. But the two critiques are connected on a deeper level. Modern philosophical rationalism, long before peaking in Hegel’s presuppositionless system, encourages people to doubt received wisdom and traditional belief. Kierkegaard’s unfinished *Johannes Climacus* suggests a connection that later critics of political rationalism make also: political rationalism is the vulgarized legacy of Descartes.⁵³ But while Oakeshott

⁵⁰ *Two Ages*, 81.

⁵¹ *Two Ages*, 89.

⁵² *Two Ages*, 103.

⁵³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 135.

emphasizes the formal supremacy of method or technical knowledge in Cartesianism—he points to his more precise construal of twentieth-century political rationalism—Kierkegaard proposes that Descartes gives an imprimatur to doubt, with far-reaching effects.⁵⁴ Kierkegaard’s “optimal and normative” political community requires sharing admirable ideals that are asphyxiated by the modern predilection to doubt. No less a student of the modern collapse of authority than Hannah Arendt called Kierkegaard’s slender unfinished book the “deepest interpretation” of Cartesian doubt.⁵⁵

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 J. G. Hamann, Kierkegaard argues that reason is powerless to answer such questions: we can only reason about what we first experience. (The same argument from Hamann is taken up by Isaiah Berlin’s critique of political rationalism.)⁵⁶ In *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Johannes Climacus protests 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.”⁵⁷ Ancient philosophy that begins in wonder could begin from existing opinions or phenomena, but modern post-Cartesian philosophy can only doubt the arbitrariness of any ‘point of departure’ for action.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Michael Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” pp. 5-42, in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1991), 20.

⁵⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 275 n32.

⁵⁶ Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 354.

⁵⁷ *Two Ages*, 40.

⁵⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 145.

The same “negative principle” animates both modern philosophical rationalism and political rationalism, transmuting the ideals of former ages into “make-believe,” so that only the illusion of shared reason remains.⁵⁹ Kierkegaard identifies envy as the opposite of wonder, and the passion that supplies modern philosophers’ motivation to doubt.⁶⁰ Envy also motivates citizens to doubt their fellows, embrace skeptical philosophy, and void powerful ideals from the public realm. After leveling, twentieth-century critics identify specific positive formations that fill the vacuum, like Oakeshott’s sovereignty of technique or Eric Voegelin’s “gnosticism.”⁶¹ Kierkegaard describes an earlier development, but perhaps a more lasting one. He envisions something like a “postmodern” age where words change their meaning and no longer connect to reality.⁶² And *Two Ages* seems especially relevant today, amid broad concerns that the Internet and social media have had deleterious effects upon political communication. We still live in the present age.

Ultimately, Kierkegaard is less concerned with explaining the origins of the present age, and more concerned with developing an exit strategy. How can one jolt citizens out of the mode of public reasoning, and into ethical and religious existence, spheres of life that afford the passionate ideals that unite communities? Kierkegaard brusquely rejects the idea that a more systematic political philosophy is necessary for this task: “Instead of all these hypotheses about

⁵⁹ *Two Ages*, 103.

⁶⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 146n. Ironically, Descartes accused *his* own opponents of envy, claiming that this was their only motivation to doubt *his* method. René Descartes, *Letter to Dinet*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vol. 2*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 387-388.

⁶¹ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), Ch. 4.

⁶² See Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, “Modernity, Mass Society, and the Media,” pp. 23-61, in *The Corsair Affair, International Kierkegaard Commentary 13*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1990), 49-56.

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?"⁶³ Kierkegaard recommends silence and suffering as points of departure, and his second authorship would make a major theme of the imitation of the suffering Christ.⁶⁴ However, by example, Kierkegaard shows how poetry, literature, and literary criticism create points of departure as well. *A Story of Everyday Life* might show us our reflection in Dalmund or Ferdinand. Although Kierkegaard at times adopts an apocalyptic tone, the situation is far from hopeless:

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...⁶⁵

Kierkegaard sees a silver lining. The present age cannot appear serious to those who honestly desire to live ethically or religiously.

⁶³ Søren Kierkegaard, Pap. X, A 72, n.d. 1851.

⁶⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, 98 and 109.

⁶⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, 88.