

Kierkegaardian Individualism and the Political

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Introduction

Even outside of contemporary political science, much scholarship insists that every cultural production—every work of literature or philosophy, every institution and utterance—conceals the political, at its unarticulated but vital core. ‘The political’ is thus often unearthed in inquiries promising to deliver ‘the politics of’ a given phenomenon. Some recent examples from prestigious university presses include: *The Politics of Intimacy*, *The Politics of Ugliness*, *The Politics of Evidence*, *The Politics of Emotion*, *The Politics of Pure Science*, and indeed *The Politics of Being*. ‘The political’ is everything, and everywhere. And yet we are at the same time told that the most significant political problems we face seem not only unprecedented, but ‘systemic’ or ‘global’, beyond the agency of any individual human being.¹ The political is, in a sense, out of reach, but it is also held that

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¹ Often the term ‘polycrisis’ is used both in academic work and popular discourse to name the overlapping set of systemic or global issues—including climate change, economic inequality, social oppression, etc. The term was introduced in Edgar Morin’s *Homeland Earth* (Hampton Press, 1999). To give a recent, high-profile example, Adam Tooze’s 2023 Tanner Lecture on Human Values at Princeton University was called ‘The Last Dystopia: Historicizing the Anthropocene Debate in a Multipolar Age: Lecture II—Polycrisis’. Relevant to the purposes of this paper, Tooze links his analytical approach to Hegel.

no element of human life fails to express it in some unintended way. The political touches everything about us, and yet there's nothing we can do about it.

The politics of this odd situation—we might say 'the politics of an age devoted to "the politics of..."—are worthy of consideration. Usually investigations bearing the title 'the politics of' say little about the political itself but indicate an investigation into 'the most important thing about' a given phenomenon.² The political is not understood with any helpful specificity, but as that which provides meaning and purpose to human life, and thus relevance to any intellectual project. Whatever is held as the absolute becomes conflated with the 'the political', and so 'the political' is the absolute. Our age elevates the significance of the political as the source of meaning for individual lives, while also suggesting that the only relevant scope for human action is global or systemic. The political, so relevant to my life, is nevertheless the proper domain of institutions which remain stubbornly outside of anyone's control. The incongruence between our constant reflection about the political and our inability to do anything about it means that we are always thinking about politics, but never truly 'being' political. Or, insofar as we understand *everything* to be political, the actual domain of politics is so diffuse as to become, to borrow a phrase, 'an invisible vanishing point'.³ The best we can do, then, is to access the political through reflection, through something inalienable—our ability to think.

In this paper I argue that a certain kind of Kierkegaardian individualism is the paradoxical solution to the way the reflective age distorts our relationship to the political. Kierkegaard diagnoses the pathologies of the reflective age in *Two Ages: A Literary Review*, but then demurs from locating the intellectual origin of the problem and from offering an alternative account of the political. Both are offered, I suggest, in his other major work of 1846: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, written under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus. *Postscript* offers a complex account of how to 'become subjective', and the recovery of this salutary individualism, I argue, has the effect of restoring a generative relationship with the

² An observation made in conversation by Teresa Bejan in 2020.

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, tr. H. Hong & E. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1982), 68.

political. The *Postscript* identifies the source of the reflective age in its direct attack on Hegel, but also on the common-sense Hegelianism of the educated class of Kierkegaard's day. For Climacus, exclusive focus on world-historical significance through politics—Hegel's 'objective spirit'—abstracts from the perspective of the single individual in a way that makes us 'incompetent to act'. 'Politics' becomes having the appropriate speculative relationship to world-historical matters at a remove from my daily life. As Climacus shows, inheritors of the Hegelian approach have made ethical and political life easier by offloading the relevant agency from where it really exists (in persons and communities) to a speculative system. Because such a system cannot be acted on directly, action gives way to thought. The result is depoliticized passivity and the illusion of agency. In place of this approach—and the intellectual account undergirding it—Climacus offers an account of ethics as a domain discrete from speculative thought. Climacus's injunction to 'mind our own business', I argue, does not arise from an apolitical bourgeois inwardness, but from a realistic assessment of the conditions for ethical and political action in the world. Kierkegaardian individualism does not trivialize politics; the twin notions that politics can mediate all human subjectivity and that *everything* is, finally, political, trivializes politics by making it so diffuse as to be meaningless. Kierkegaard's individualism clarifies the political by disambiguating it from ethics.

I begin with Kierkegaard's analysis of our 'reflective age' with respect to the political in *Two Ages*.⁴ I then offer a brief excursus on Hegel's political thought with special attention paid to its elision of ethics into politics before turning to Climacus's critique of the same as the origin of the reflective age in the *Postscript*. I then lay out Climacus's reappropriation of 'the ethical' as a category of individual human existence discrete from 'the political'. I conclude by making the paradoxical case for why Kierkegaardian individualism is the precondition for recovering a specific and salutary conception of the political in the age of reflection.

⁴ Kierkegaard's original publication was called "*En literair Anmeldelse: To Tidsaldre, Novelle af Forfatteren til "en Hverdagshistorie"*" or *A Literary Review: Two Ages A Novel by the author of A Tale of Everyday Life*. I follow most modern editors and scholars in reviewing to the resulting essay as *Two Ages*, although it is sometimes excerpted as *The Present Age*, focusing on the social and political commentary of the essay's third part.

The Politics of Reflection

Writing in 1846—two years before a minor revolution that ended absolutism but also instituted the Danish Constitutional Monarchy that persists to this day—Søren Kierkegaard believed he saw the Owl of Minerva flying uncharacteristically early in the day. Following the revolutionary tumult of 18th and early 19th Century Europe, Kierkegaard thought a new and very different age was burgeoning in pleasant, prosperous Copenhagen: ‘If one may say of the revolutionary period that it runs wild’, he wrote, ‘one may say of the present that it runs badly.’⁵ Kierkegaard was making a return to public writing after a brief, half-hearted retirement. Following the publication of Johannes Climacus’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* in February of that year, Kierkegaard thought he might finally follow through on his threat to become a country parson,⁶ but ventured back into the public square with a review of Thomasine Gyllembourg’s anonymously published *Two Ages* (think *War and Peace* meets *Middlemarch*). Kierkegaard’s review, titled only *A Literary Review*, ballooned to fifty pages, using his analysis of the novel as a jumping off point to articulate a theory of ‘the age’. As Robert Wyllie observes, for Kierkegaard a literary review becomes a surprisingly apt vehicle for political thought since ‘[he] argues that reviewers do not address a political opponent, but instead an entire “age, a reading public”.’⁷

In the present age, Kierkegaard observes, great deeds have been replaced by reflection (*Reflexion*), and so ‘nothing’ ever ‘really’ happens.⁸ Preoccupied with ‘advertising and publicity’, the age is perennially distracted by the sense that something important has just

⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, tr. A. Hannay (Harper Perennials, 2007), 4. I have also worked from Søren Kierkegaard, *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age, A Literary Review*, tr. H. Hong and E. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1978) and Søren Kierkegaard, *En literair Anmeldelse* (Hos Universitetsboghandler C. A. Reitzel, 1846). Electronic edition: <https://tekster.kb.dk/text/sks-la-txt-root>.

⁶ Claire Carlisle, *Philosopher of the Heart: The Restless Life of Søren Kierkegaard* (Penguin, 2019), 100-102.

⁷ Robert Wyllie, ‘Kierkegaard’s Later Critique of Political Rationalism’ in *Critics of Enlightenment Rationalism*, eds. Callahan and McIntyre, (Palgrave, 2020), 49.

⁸ Kierkegaard makes a distinction throughout his writings between *Reflexion* and *Taenken* or ‘thinking’. ‘Thinking’ is purposive, teleological, and aims at understanding things; ‘reflection’ is infinite, abstract, and deals with representations.

occurred or is just about to begin. In such an age, the primacy of reflection makes passionate activity difficult by transforming all human experience into ‘representational ideas’.⁹ We concern ourselves less with what has happened than with the purported significance of what has happened. Such an emphasis on reflection is dangerous because it transforms the ‘capacity for action into a means of escape from action.’¹⁰ The age consequently forsakes particularity in favour of the abstractions that better lend themselves to reflection. Reflection about human life, and indeed about one’s own life, takes the place of activity: ‘being without passion, [the age] has lost all feeling for the values of *erōs*, for enthusiasm and sincerity in politics and religion, or for piety, admiration and domesticity in everyday life.’¹¹ Reflection puts a stop between thought and act. As a result, we become literally disaffected, apathetic.

Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the passionless, reflective character of the age should not, however, lead us to think that modern human beings have become more moderate or self-controlled. Kierkegaard adds that one area of human endeavour that still arouses great interest is the pursuit of money, a medium of pure possibility. Money is the material manifestation of anxious reflection—we do not love it for reasons associated with sensuousness, but because it introduces the sort of fluidity characteristic of reflection into the world of practical affairs, making, indeed, all that is solid melt into air.¹² Therefore the overwhelming commitment to abstract reflection in ‘the present age’ does not produce impractical daydreamers lost in thought, but envious materialists, whose hyper-intellectualism is hardly a distraction from their unfettered pursuit of gain.

The other notable enthusiasm of the reflective age, Kierkegaard suggests, is for egalitarian levelling. Levelling is a ‘silent, mathematical, and abstract occupation which shuns upheavals’ and ‘hinders and stifles’ all action.¹³ Since reflection establishes a preference for abstraction, levelling makes universality the relevant unit for politics.

⁹ Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 11.

¹⁰ Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 42.

¹¹ Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 10

¹² For an interesting, but for reasons explored in this paper, ultimately misguided attempt to bring together Kierkegaard’s psychology with Marx’ analysis of capitalism, see Jamie Aroosi, *The Dialectical Self* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

¹³ Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 23.

Reflection can pull the thinnest homogeneity out of the plurality of human experience, not finding equality, but ignoring difference. Reflection is speculative in a way that can simply do away with inconvenient phenomena, no matter how real. The ethical consequence of levelling is that we learn to act ‘on principle’, focussing on humanity in general, rather than the specifics of a given political situation. And, as Tocqueville observed a little over a decade earlier, the process of levelling means impatience with form so severe that I might paradoxically come to think of myself as a member of a generation or a class instead of as an individual.¹⁴ Paradoxically, this means that in addressing ‘the age’, Kierkegaard is addressing his readers the way we, on some level, desire to be addressed. The composition of *Two Ages* indeed reflects such a rhetorical strategy, denouncing abstractions and generalities in a series of abstractions and generalities.

Under these conditions, Kierkegaard avers, the exercise of political power becomes abstract or depersonalized to such an extent that I experience the political as a ‘third person’, who reflects on what happens, rather than the subject or object of political rule. In the reflective age, the political ‘whole’ no longer supports the concrete development of individuals but considers and treats individuals as interchangeable members of the ‘public’, an ‘abstract and deserted void that is everything and nothing’.¹⁵ Real introspection, to say nothing of philosophical self-knowledge, gives way to an attempt to shoehorn myself into general categories—the Myers-Briggsification of personal development.

Viewed as a member of the public, I imagine myself as ‘something even greater than a king above his people’ while sinking my individuality into a ‘gruesome abstraction’ that is little more than a ‘fairy tale’ in truth. Just as I concern myself more with abstractions about events than the events themselves, so too am I less concerned about myself, than with ideas about myself. Subjects consider themselves as objects; the self is replaced instead with ‘identity’. The greatest danger, Kierkegaard surmises, is transforming myself into a spectator to my own life. In such a situation, the political views I express

¹⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, tr. H. Mansfield and D. Winthrop (University of Chicago Press, 2000), esp. II.i.3, ‘Why the Americans Show More Aptitude and Taste for General Ideas Than Their English Fathers’.

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 36.

become divorced from the person who utters them. This is the fruit of a speculative or reflective quest for objectivity: Words then become ‘talk’, severed from action and character, producing an ‘atmosphere’ that makes real human speech redundant ‘just as machinery makes [humanity] superfluous’.¹⁶ The age then becomes ‘more knowledgeable than any former generation’ but lacks the passion to transform reflection into action.

Kierkegaard’s diagnosis of the age provides a compelling explanation for our paradoxical relationship to the political as sketched above. But our emphasis on the political as the locus of absolute meaning can only come from confusing my individual life with the fate of the public as such; our disaffection, in turn, comes from the belief that reflection is the relevant domain of politics. If this is the case, the extraordinary development of digital communications technologies—‘advertisement and publicity’—seem *ceteris paribus* as an outgrowth of a prior theoretical orientation, rather than the conditions for that orientation. In this way, *Two Ages* would almost seem prophetic, if its final sentences were not devoted to delivering a warning against modern prophesying.¹⁷ In *Two Ages*, Kierkegaard offers a straightforwardly religious alternative: the ‘cruelty of abstraction makes the true form of worldliness only too evident’ and so individuals will leap the ‘sharp scythe of the leveller’ into faith.¹⁸ Despite the attempts of some later commentators to find a secular antidote to the age of reflection, the book shows no obvious path forward.¹⁹ *Two Ages* may be long on invective and, humanly speaking, short on solutions, lacking even an account of the origins of this age of reflection.

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 52.

¹⁷ *The Present Age*, 62.

¹⁸ *The Present Age*, 58.

¹⁹ The reception history of *Two Ages* has the dubious distinction of counting both Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt among those it inspired. But, as this essay shows, neither Heideggerian decisionism nor Schmittian vitalism captures the true human alternative to the reflective age. See Wyllie, ‘Kierkegaard’s Later Critique’, 52; *pace*, Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason* (Princeton, 2009), 238. Kierkegaard’s alternative must be understood in reference to the Hegelian origin of the problem. Both Schmitt and Heidegger radicalize Hegelian historicism and are unwilling to affirm Kierkegaard’s rigorous account of individual ethics. Schmitt elides the significance of the individual altogether in *The Concept of the Political*, and despite his reliance on certain Kierkegaardian ideas in *Being and Time*, Heidegger does something similar with Dasein’s *Mitsein*.

But Kierkegaard published something else in 1846 that offered just that: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

An Excursus on Hegelian Political Theory

The last of Kierkegaard's published pseudonymous works before *Two Ages* was *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the sequel to *Philosophical Fragments*. Early on in *Postscript*, while dwelling on *Fragments*' failure to find an audience, Climacus tells us that—unlike the persona of the literary reviewer Kierkegaard adopts in *Two Ages*—a writer like him cannot address the age or the 'public', but only the single individual.²⁰ The expressed goal of *Postscript* is to show how it is possible to 'become subjective', to live not as a member of the crowd or the public, but as a human being tasked with finding the meaning and purpose of their own life. Climacus argues that even though we exist in time, we adopt the illusory 'objective' view that we are mere spectators of our own lives.²¹ Climacus shows none of Kierkegaard's own reticence in identifying the intellectual origin of the disease of reflection, identifying it as 'speculation', 'the system', 'objective thought', 'the world historical', or simply 'Hegel'.

For Hegel, the ethical realm has been transformed by the development of Spirit or self-consciousness in history. In the modern world, we understand the shape and method by which reason itself operates in history: this is what Hegel in the *Phenomenology* calls 'Absolute Knowing'.²² For Hegel, the task of philosophy is to make historical forces intelligible. He does this in a staggering encyclopaedic manner, across virtually all expressions of self-consciousness: logic, world history, aesthetics, the history of philosophy, religion, and in the development of the ethical life of the modern state. As Robert Pippin puts it, 'there is a form of reason at work in collective attempts at self-understanding, and by being at work historical change

²⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, tr. H. Hong & E. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1998), 8. Hereafter abbreviated *CUP*. I have also consulted Søren Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift til de filosofiske Smuler* (Hos C. A. Reitzel, Universitets-Boghandler, 1846). Electronic edition: <https://tekster.kb.dk/text/sks-ae-txt-root>.

²¹ *CUP*, 133. Gordon Marino insightfully explores Kierkegaard's diagnoses and alternatives to this problem in *Kierkegaard in the Present Age* (Marquette University Press, 2001), especially Chapter 1.

²² G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A.V. Miller (Oxford University Press, 1977), §799 – 808.

itself could be disclosed as a progressively common project. Human history makes sense, like everything else.’²³

In *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel outlines the significance of this development for political life in the emergence of freedom understood as political right. While in the past it has been possible for subjective moral intuitions to conflict with political right, the modern world has in principle resolved this conflict: the state is therefore ‘absolutely rational’ and in its ‘self-consciousness’ is raised to ‘consciousness of its universality’.²⁴ Life in the modern state allows individuals to mediate their subjective desires into the universal ethical consciousness of a political community.²⁵ The political community recognizes these desires as legitimate and incorporates them into the common ethical life of all citizens. The content of an individual’s will is distinguished from ‘mere arbitrariness’ for Hegel, when it is recognized rationally by the ethical life of the state.²⁶ Or, put succinctly: ‘[t]he essence of the modern state is that the universal should be linked with the complete freedom of particularity and the well-being of individuals.’²⁷ Hegelian right is the existence of the ‘free will’ in the world: when *I* freely recognize the rationality of the state as the ethical universal and the *universal* recognizes *me* as a free subject, freedom has been made ‘concrete’ in history. Political right is constituted by reflection. As rational subjects mature we move from an ‘abstract’ understanding of right and wrong (‘do it because we say so’), to subjective morality (‘it is good because I will it’), to a mature, socially-mediated ethics: ‘I understand that my freedom is truly mediated by the rationality of the whole, and that whole, in turn, recognizes me as a free, rational agent when I recognize it.’ For Hegel a mature ethical life entails the mediation of individual ethical life by the state. Thus, the ethical and the political are, in both form and content, one.

²³ Robert Pippin, ‘Historicized Philosophy’ in *The Brooklyn Rail* (October 2023), <https://brooklynrail.org/2023/10/criticspage/Historicized-Philosophy/>.

²⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. A. Wood, tr. H. Nisbet (Cambridge University Press, 1991), §258.

²⁵ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §257.

²⁶ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §29.

²⁷ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §260; §261. Importantly for Hegel, this is bolstered by the existence of ‘civil society’, a zone for the associational pursuit of self-interest that falls between the traditional categories of *polis* and *oikos* that was, in his view, completely unknown to antiquity.

The content of my freedom is then furnished by *Sittlichkeit*—the ‘ethical universal’—at a particular historical moment in the form of duty, and ‘in doing my duty, I myself am free.’ As Michael Rosen puts it, ‘Hegel’s position [regarding ethics] is...neither simply universalist nor particularist, but a combination of the two: something may be wrong from a universal, objective point of view, but justified and necessary in the context at that time. It is only at the end of the historical development that universal and particular coincide.’²⁸ Ethics corresponds to the demands of world history as mediated by the universal of my political community, and *my* freedom consists in my recognition of the rationality of the laws of the state. I take its laws as the fulfilment of my subjective desires since I *want*, ultimately, to be free. Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* in this way attempts to reconcile the ‘objective’ ethics of classical antiquity—a rational account of the good and the limitation of arbitrary desire—with the ‘subjective’ ethics of modernity—the acknowledgement of human freedom as the foundation of legitimacy for the state. History, especially in view of its modern *terminus* provides us with a standard by which we must adjudicate ethics. The ethical life of individuals is synonymous with political life.²⁹

But if history furnishes the content of the ethical life, how can historical change occur? In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Hegel explains that some individuals fulfil their duty to ethics by participating in interruptions of the established ethical life ‘in order that world history and the world spirit may continue in their course.’ These ‘great’ individuals in world history ‘seize upon [the] higher universal emergent at a given moment in history’ and ‘make it their own end.’ Hegel continues: ‘It is they who realize the end appropriate to the higher concept of spirit. To this extent, they may be called heroes.’³⁰ These individuals ‘do not find their aims and vo-

²⁸ Michael Rosen, *The Shadow of God* (Harvard University Press, 2022), 180.

²⁹ In view of the content of the ethical life being supplied by the Concept in time as seen through the development of world history, Jon Stewart’s insistence that Climacus does not have Hegel in mind in his criticisms of ‘the world historical’ but is focussing, rather, on Grundtvig, is not persuasive, and has been damaging to Kierkegaard scholarship on this point through its influence. See Stewart, *Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 497-9.

³⁰ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, tr. H. Nisbet (Cambridge University Press, 1975), 82-83.

cation in the calm and the regular system of the present, in the hallowed order of things as they are.’³¹ Such ‘world historical individuals’ are great not because of their peculiar merit, their choices, sufferings, or virtues, but because they recognize the contours of the universal that is to come and become its agents. Heroes are not significant exemplars for conduct, nor models for our lives, but ‘are admirable simply because they have made themselves the instruments of the substantial spirit’.³² Hegel concludes that in ‘the true relationship between the individual and his universal substance’ the individual is dependent upon the historical circumstances in which they act. As modern citizens our goal is to suss out these moments of negation or self-contradiction through the working of the Spirit and raise them to self-conscious reflection for everyone. The benefit of modernity is that this very process is enshrined in the constitutional apparatus of the state. Both when things change and when they stay the same, the content of the ethical life is supplied by history. As Richard Bourke puts it, the goal of Hegel’s writing is to clarify and reconcile modern human beings to this history: ‘Hegelianism...is the education of the human race.’³³

The ‘Ethical Incompetence’ of Hegelianism

For Climacus, ‘the human race’ is ineducable and any attempt to abstract education away from individuals is therefore undesirable. The crisis he addresses is that the speculative or Hegelian perspective has leaked from the lab: historicism is no longer the purview of ‘particular scholars’, but the ‘whole age is [now] clamouring for world history.’³⁴ We see ourselves in world-historical terms—history ‘will judge’ certain actions, we must position ourselves ‘on the right side’ of history,

³¹ Hegel, *World History*, 84.

³² But see Richard Bourke, *Hegel’s World Revolutions* (Princeton University Press, 2023), 106-7. Bourke shares a memorable image Hegel develops early in his career of a subterranean people aiming to improve their lot by digging upward into a lake. Different groups try different methods to access the water, growing restless, until at length it surges in: ‘It *drinks them*, Hegel wrote, while they *drink it*.’ Bourke’s and Rosen’s excellent new studies of Hegel show that Climacus is a perceptive reader of Hegel, against the literature in Kierkegaard studies which, following Stewart, insists that the pseudonymous writings are more concerned with historically local considerations.

³³ Bourke, *Hegel’s World Revolutions*, xv.

³⁴ *CUP*, 135.

and the significance of our ethical choices has to do with how they will be commemorated historically—the ‘legacy’ we leave behind us.³⁵ But Climacus opposes the world-historical orientation of ethics in a characteristically idiosyncratic way: he provides no guidance on ‘what’ constitutes the ethical or ethical conduct. Neither is there any recommendation of a specific ethical choice, nor is any specific ethical principle endorsed, nor anything identified as good or evil, right or wrong. Climacus instead provides a phenomenology of the ethical life which shows how this life is obscured by a speculative emphasis on history.³⁶ His mode of analysis contests the Hegelian approach, which attempts to undo the ‘empty formalism’ of Kantian ethics by supplying content through customary morality.³⁷ And yet Climacus does not appeal to Kantian ethics, either. Instead, he concentrates on the fact that ethics is a ‘qualitative’ category focussed on single individuals.

Ethics, Climacus suggests, ‘looks with a suspicious eye at all world-historical knowledge’ because it becomes ‘a trap’ for the knowing subject.³⁸ It is a trap because from the perspective of an individual agent, history is driven by contingency, not reason or choice. The details of anything judged significant to history are contingent on their own terms, because of the unpredictability of who and what will rise

³⁵ For an account which argues that Hegel’s great insight is to move the pursuit of immortality—eternal happiness—from God to history, see Rosen’s impressive *The Shadow of God*. As Daphne Hampson argues, access to Hegel’s so-called ‘early theological writings’ have allowed a clearer understanding of his desire to take the *Begriffe* of religion and show them ‘to be a useful illustration of what he would in any case say’. Hampson, *Kierkegaard: Exposition and Critique* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 141. Hampson is also clear-eyed that the major disagreement has to do with the issue of historicism, a reckoning tellingly absent from most Kierkegaard scholarship.

³⁶ Jon Stewart’s claim that ‘Climacus does not develop [his] criticism [of Hegel’s] ethics’ is confusing (*Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel*, 515). Stewart will rightly go on to observe that for Climacus ‘either Hegel has an ethics within the system, and this is wrong since ethics cannot be systematized and belongs to the realm of freedom, or Hegel has no ethics within the system and thus has forgotten ethics entirely’ (519). Stewart concludes that Climacus and Hegel simply have disparate ethical systems, where, for Hegel, ethics belongs to ‘a people’ and for Climacus it belongs to an individual (522). The missing piece is an analysis of Hegel’s historicism, which is the actual focus of Climacus’s criticism of Hegelian ethics.

³⁷ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §135.

³⁸ *CUP*, 134.

to historical significance. In human affairs the historical significance of an action often runs counter to the intentions of the individual who undertook that action. For this reason, history cannot serve to evaluate ethical conduct.

Climacus further notes that when Hegel substitutes ‘the great’ for ‘the good’ in his assessment of world-historical individuals, he abstracts from the perspective of these heroes as they act in time. There is instead ‘a play of forces in which the reshaping totality of historical life absorbs the individual’s action in order to transform it into something different that does not directly belong to him.’³⁹ Climacus interprets history not as the arena where *freedom* develops, but of *free acts* which generate contingent circumstances.⁴⁰ Neither willing the good nor willing evil to the height of one’s powers guarantees world-historical success: ‘Ethically viewed, [one] becomes world-historical by accident. But ethics also considers unethical the transition whereby a person abandons the ethical quality in order to try his hand, cravingly, wishfully...at quantifying the other.’⁴¹ Ethics is *the* realm of human life subject to our control, as an ethical choice shows itself distinctively in its being freely chosen regardless of the consequences.⁴² As Aristotle observed, we do not praise or blame actions that are compelled or involuntary. A choice must always be between something better and worse, and so choice implies the categories of right and wrong, good and bad. Put otherwise, ethics is the sphere where, constitutively, my choices matter.⁴³ To confuse world-histor-

³⁹ CUP, 134.

⁴⁰ Hampson rightly observes that Climacus’s perspective on history is ‘quite fundamentally...Hebraic and, in so far as eternity is juxtaposed with time, one might say also [in keeping with] the Greek tradition’. See Hampson, *Kierkegaard*, 163.

⁴¹ CUP, 134-5.

⁴² Niels Thulstrup, *Commentary on Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript: With a New Introduction* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 232-4.

⁴³ This is different from a Hegelian understanding of morality as a matter of pure self-determination. Certainly, for Climacus one must make ethical decisions on one’s own, but simply because I choose something does not make it ethical. Climacus’s account of ethics is phenomenological or descriptive, not prescriptive like Hegel’s (and Kant’s). For a different view, see Paul Cruysberghs, ‘Hegel Has No Ethics: Climacus’s Complaints Against Speculative Philosophy’ in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2005*, eds. Cappelørn and Deuser with Söderquist (Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 175-191. Cruysberghs argues that ‘Hegel would completely agree with Climacus’s position’ on ethics, except he would consider Climacus to be describing morality, not ethics. For both Hegel and Cruysberghs, subjects cannot remain in the sphere or morality

ical significance with right and wrong is to confuse the accidental with the domain of choice, and thus freedom.

Viewed ethically, Climacus argues, ‘continually being occupied with world history’ means becoming an observer of the accidental. To observe the accidental in world history is about as far as I can come from freely choosing the good as it appears to me. Too much reflection upon the accidental means forgetting about the subjective character of human life. Contingency can be endlessly interesting fuel for reflection, but such reflection is qualitatively distinct from ethical choice. And, what’s worse, becoming lost in reflection makes me a spectator instead of an agent. Ethical life is qualitatively distinct from the quantitative tasks of mass politics in a world-historical age. Organizing, building a movement, following a trend are all attempts ‘to become something more than one is by lumping together socially in the hope of impressing the spirit of history numerically’.⁴⁴ And then, ‘spoiled by constant association with world history’, Climacus proclaims, we focus only on ‘world-historical outcomes’ instead of attending to our innermost freedom, which comes from true ethical choice.⁴⁵ In this way, he bracingly concludes, ‘continual association with the world historical makes a person incompetent to act.’⁴⁶ But why would this be? History is a record of the outcomes of actions and not unreasonably links the specific deeds of agents with these outcomes or effects. Climacus observes that, on the contrary, historical outcomes bear no necessary relation to the intentions of the actor. The relationship between intent and action is therefore obscured by the belief that only outcomes, which cannot be controlled, are worthy of note.⁴⁷ And, historically, this is true. If one comes to believe

but rely on *Sittlichkeit* for the content of their ethical duties. It is *this move*, the historicism it entails, and the transformation it effects on the ethical life, that Climacus criticizes. It seems that both Stewart and Cruysberg simply disagree with Climacus’s criticism of Hegel and so deflect it to a separate domain. Climacus’s point is that *Hegel* quite explicitly collapses necessary categories of human experience and so fails *phenomenologically*.

⁴⁴ CUP, 135. Cf. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, II.iii.6.

⁴⁵ CUP, 135.

⁴⁶ CUP, 135.

⁴⁷ In an interesting way this critique connects with Machiavelli’s articulation of the ‘effectual truth’ in *The Prince*. To see beyond what is said to what is actually done, Machiavelli urges judgment of the truth according to the effects a choice produces. Machiavelli raises his discussion of the effectual truth during his presentation of vir-

one's actions are meaningful only through the effects they produce, one loses the impetus for action, as one will eventually surmise that effects cannot be controlled by the actions one intends. We are therefore often enjoined—by social scientists and economists—to consider the ways that 'the data' understood as the outcomes of aggregate actions might be generated by counterintuitive or facially unethical practices. 'Policy' supplants 'politics', which has already cast ethics aside.

By projecting ethics into the sphere of world history, we must live as if we were in control of contingency. But in attempting to live as if we have such control, we strip ourselves of the agency we do have, because instead of prudently choosing means appropriate to ends, to use Aristotelian terms, we imagine outcomes or ends to be matters of choice. World history encourages us to live as if we 'anticipate [our] own pastness [*fortidnaes*]' by situating ourselves in a historical context that abstracts from human existence in time.⁴⁸ History is not the meaning of action, but the context in which such action occurs. We do not have to change a human being into 'something totally different' to understand him or her 'in context', since the individuality we would grasp then becomes not a human being, but a contingent and therefore incomprehensible being. The entire project of thinking about ethics assumes consistency in human experience across

tue and vice, and this choice is not arbitrary. Our intentions, Machiavelli suggests, matter little if they do not generate the desired outcomes—and indeed, often the outcome is the opposite of our wish. Thus, for Machiavelli something 'appears liberal' which, if pursued 'will lead to your ruin rather than your preservation'; attempts at mercy sometimes have the outcome of cruelty—and vice-versa. This emphasis on the effectual truth leads Machiavelli to suggest that modern political science ought to orient itself toward a study of the outcomes of actions as evidenced in world history. Machiavelli's two principal works of political philosophy—*The Prince* but especially *The Discourses on Livy*—do just this. See *The Prince*, tr. H. Mansfield (University of Chicago Press, 1998) and *Discourses on Livy*, tr. H. Mansfield (University of Chicago Press, 2001). For this reason, Leo Strauss and his followers associate Machiavelli's modernity with the rise of historicism. See Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), esp. ch. 3. For an exemplary study of Machiavelli's account of the effectual truth, linking it not only to modern historicism but to modern science, see Mansfield, *Machiavelli's Effectual Truth* (Cambridge University Press, 2023). Although Kierkegaard does not seem to have known Machiavelli, Climacus's critique of historicism here connects the notion of the effectual truth—concern with the 'outcomes'—with historicism.

⁴⁸ CUP, 146.

time and *in time*. The danger, for Climacus, is that ‘after first having world-historically misunderstood [a historical figure] now go[es] further and allow[s] this misunderstanding to help me misunderstand myself, as if I, too, were dead and gone’. Historical knowledge requires self-knowledge as surely as every other domain of human inquiry: By focussing on ‘greatness’ in the sense of the world-historical individual I lose the potential to become great because ‘when he was alive, the world-historical individuality probably helped himself with subjective ethics and then governance added world-historical importance, if he obtained any.’⁴⁹ You do not become Caesar or Napoleon by setting out to become Caesar or Napoleon. To become immersed in the world historical is to guarantee that one could never match the achievements of those who lived with pre-historicist consciousnesses. Historicism makes us incompetent to act by abstracting from what it is like to make an ethical choice as a human being, emphasizing reflection to the exclusion of human existence in time. It is the intellectual error that gives rise to the reflective age.

Climacean Ethics

Climacus’s alternative vision for the ethical life centres on the experience of what it is like for a human being to choose the good. ‘True ethical enthusiasm’, he writes, ‘consists in willing to the utmost of one’s capability, but also, uplifted in divine jest, in never thinking whether or not one thereby achieves something.’⁵⁰ The truly ethical agent wills the good without reference to the outcomes of that choice. Climacus advises submerging oneself with passionate enthusiasm in the tasks of living. As soon as the will ‘casts a covetous eye’ on outcomes, its energy ‘becomes torpid’ because it recognizes it is free only to control itself, and not the world outside of itself. The ‘torpor’ is the result of being told to will impossibilities. Enormous, systemic problems like climate change or global poverty cannot be acted upon as systemic problems at the world historical scale: our capacity for knowledge and our capacity for choice are out of step.

⁴⁹ *CUP*, 147. Again, there are interesting echoes of themes in Machiavelli, as Machiavelli claims just the opposite of Climacus here in his analysis of the greatest political founders of Western history: *they* looked only to the outcomes, the effectual truth, as Machiavelli himself does in *The Prince*.

⁵⁰ *CUP*, 135.

Instead, I can walk to work and restrain my appetites. The alternative leads to nihilism, like the widely observed phenomenon of ‘climate despair’: individuals view the climate crisis as basically intractable because of the mismatch between their apprehension of the crisis and their power to act.⁵¹ The ability to control the relation of cause and effect lies outside of our control. Instead, we must choose what can be chosen: the good as it appears to us as individuals.

Climacus goes so far as to suggest that a ‘truly great ethical individuality’ would consummate his life in this way: develop himself to the utmost of his capability, ‘in the process he perhaps would produce a great effect in the external world, but this would not occupy him at all, because he would know that the external is not in his power and therefore means nothing either *pro* or *contra*.’⁵² Such a person would perform their ethical actions, in other words, for their own sake, or for the sake of what Aristotle might call the beautiful or the noble. Climacus amusingly shows that the true ethical ‘heroes’ are the precise opposites of Hegel’s world historical individuals: instead of attending to context, seeing what the spirit demands, they lose themselves in the for-itselfness of their deeds. The great ethical individual would remain completely ignorant about the outcomes of their actions, even until death: ‘Then, if the power governing all things would want to dispose circumstances so that he became a world-historical figure—well, that is something he would inquire about jestingly in eternity.’⁵³ Ethics *qua* ethics corresponds to the choice of what appears to be good, and the maximally ethical life is characterized by a full commitment to making those choices. Although Hegelian ethics promises ‘concrete freedom’ by attending to the demands of the times, Climacus suggests that true human freedom comes from carefully distinguishing between the arena of choice and that of contingency and by refusing the collapse of the ethical into the political.

If Hegel suggests that the most mature ethical personalities be-

⁵¹ For a probing analysis of this phenomenon see Willa Swenson-Legyal, ‘Moral Paralysis and Practical Denial: Environmental Ethics in Light of Human Failure’, *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 37.2 (2017), 171-187. For an application of Kierkegaard’s work to this specific problem see Ruby Guyatt, ‘Kierkegaard in the Anthropocene: Hope, Philosophy, and the Climate Crisis’, *Religions* 11.6 (2020), 1- 12.

⁵² *CUP*, 135-6.

⁵³ *CUP*, 136.

come increasingly comfortable with the content of the ethical life through their mediation by the universal of the state, Climacus argues, on the contrary, that the ethical ‘becomes more difficult day by day.’⁵⁴ This is because ethics consists in continually and unqualifiedly willing the good without assessing the outcomes. The longer we live, Climacus says, the easier it is to believe—with Hegel—that the inner is the outer, and the outer is the inner. Beginnings are the easiest with the ethical understood in this way, precisely because ethical striving in Climacus’s mode may well produce results. But this is the paradox: if we embrace the success that comes from this striving, we become unable to continue it, the ‘glorious beginning’ of ethics ‘grows slack’.⁵⁵ The potential, but contingent, outcomes of ethical action weaken the impetus for continuing to choose that action. To choose to live ethically for the sake of anything outside of ethics ‘establishes a teleology that renders existence meaningless’⁵⁶ since the existence one leads is at odds with the outcome one seeks. To choose the ethical on account of the *telos* of the universal of the state, locates the significance of existence outside of the activity of existence. If some outcome, not guaranteed, is the purpose of my life, then my life as lived becomes only a means to that end. In such a situation I am left with little else to do but to reflect, to become a passive spectator waiting on a historical dispensation to give meaning to my life. If Hegel famously pillories Kant’s categorical imperative as ‘empty formalism’, we might say that Climacus’s critique of Hegel is that he has made ethics so abstract as to have made us forget what it means to choose in the first place.

Minding Your Own Business

In the reflective, Hegelian paradigm, our relationship to the ethical takes the character of a series of abstract intellectual problems to be addressed theoretically, and judged in the same way, historically, according to the outcomes. In the *Postscript*, Climacus offers a forceful reconfiguration of what makes for ethical conduct. The task of the ethical life is not one that can be finished: ‘when time itself is the task, it is a defect to finish ahead of time...To be finished with life

⁵⁴ CUP, 138.

⁵⁵ CUP, 138.

⁵⁶ CUP, 136.

before life is finished with one is not to finish the task at all.’⁵⁷ For this reason, among the chief ethical strategies Climacus recommends is ‘the power to restrain’ because ‘I do not have time to try to exercise restraint directly upon the age in which I live.’⁵⁸ We must circumscribe our ethical ambitions to our actual powers. As much as we may believe our ethical responsibilities to be global in scope, an attempt to ‘restrain the age’ is ‘as futile as for a passenger on a train to try to stop it by clutching the seat ahead of him.’ The only alternative is ‘to get off the train and restrain oneself.’⁵⁹ Ironically, such restraint allows for more a passionate, vigorous ethical life because it is integrated fully into human existence in time. Climacus reorients us toward tasks available to a single individual—his self-restraint in view of world history recentres ethics on a human scale. Ethics, beyond any positive commitment, is a passionate way of life that ‘demands’ that we become ‘infinitely interested in existing’ and develop into ‘whole human being[s]’, not spectators to our own lives.⁶⁰ To rephrase an old bumper sticker: thinking ‘globally’ is in fact the worst way to induce ourselves to ‘act locally’.

Later in the *Postscript*, Climacus suggests that much of the confusion surrounding Christianity could be cleared up by understanding it as a *how* instead of a *what*. Despite the clear distinction Climacus makes between ethics and religiousness, his approach in his analysis of ethics seems to focus more on the *how* than the *what*, too. Ethics is the task of human life in time, which is structured by our freedom and our need to make choices that appear to us better and worse. Ethics cannot be supplied by maxims nor judged by outcomes, world-historical or not. Worse, intellectualizing ethics in either the Hegelian (or Kantian) mode abstracts from the fact that ethical choices present themselves to individual human beings as we exist in time. Rather than waiting to discern the ‘right thing’ to do, the ‘right cause’ to support, Climacus’s ethical person wills the good as it appears to them in their time and place with eager earnestness. Ethical action flows from your character because it is simply who you are; in this way, it is freedom from too much reflection, from the

⁵⁷ CUP, 164.

⁵⁸ CUP, 164.

⁵⁹ CUP, 165.

⁶⁰ CUP, 264; 265.

expectations of others, from the demands of the age, the tyranny of ‘outcomes’.

Climacus does not arrogate himself to the task of explaining what is objectively right and wrong for human beings. Rather, his critique of Hegelian historicism revolves around the perverse psychological motivations that world-historical perspective creates: to concentrate too much on global—what in our time and place we are liable to call ‘systemic’—ethical problems, undermines the impetus for meaningful ethical action. Indeed, for Climacus,

the immorality of our age is perhaps not lust and pleasure and sensuality, but rather a pantheistic, debauched contempt for individual human beings...a secret contempt for being a human being—in the midst of the importance of the generation there is despair over being a human being. Everything, everything must be together; people want to delude themselves world-historically in the totality; no one wants to be an individual existing human being.⁶¹

If ethics is the art of living a human life in time, ‘immorality’ (*Uмор-alsked*) is simply the rejection of one’s ethical individuality. The emphasis on the world historical is symptomatic of a broader nihilistic anti-humanism—fatigue with, or contempt for, humanity as such. Climacus’s account of ethics challenges us restore our faith in the integrity and relevance of individual human existence, and thus respect for human beings. Although Climacus’s analysis is itself measured, the seeming extremity of his individualism is meant to reorient us toward the inconvenient truth that there can be no collective ethical action, only the choices of individuals. Indeed, recognizing this fact may be the key to reclaiming the political in the reflective age.

Conclusion: Kierkegaardian Individualism and the Political

Throughout his signed and pseudonymous works Kierkegaard defends the practice of drawing distinctions. A reflective age is anxious to synthesize distinctions into progressively more abstract unities, but human existence in time, Kierkegaard always reminds us, cannot synthesize distinctions as easily as speculation. In *Postscript*, Clima-

⁶¹ CUP, 355.

cus's attempt to distinguish the ethical life for human existence in time takes place against the backdrop of the Hegelian attempt to absorb ethical life into the modern state via the philosophy of objective spirit. Hegel's location of the content of the ethical life in the *Sittlichkeit* of the modern state creates a set of psychological conditions that at best present an ethical challenge and at the worst abstract from the experience of ethical choice in time to such an extent as to become nihilistic. Climacus presents ethics as an activity that makes sense only for single individuals, since all choices are made by such individuals in time. The collapse of ethics into politics creates an untenable psychological situation for individual agents, who become 'incompetent to act' through constant intellectual exposure to world-historical contingency, through the attempt to will outcomes or ends rather than means, and finally by the belief that reflection about political life is a meaningful substitute for passionate engagement in one's own life. In this way, *Postscript* shows the origins of the problems diagnosed in *Two Ages* and provides an alternative account of ethics. In so doing, Climacus helps us to distinguish between the ethical, which belongs to individuals, and the political, which we do together. This is indeed what Kierkegaard would later say is the requisite for any satisfying account of the political in *Two Ages*, where he writes: 'It is only after the individual has acquired an ethical outlook, in face of the whole world, that there can be any suggestion of really joining together. Otherwise, the association of individuals who are themselves weak, is just as disgusting and as harmful as the marriage of children.'⁶²

Kierkegaard thus understands what we might call ethical individualism as the precondition for any proper understanding or es-

⁶² *Two Ages*, 54. Of course, the goal of the *Postscript* is not to provide an account of ethics, but to answer the question of how its author 'can become a Christian'. But in so doing, Climacus also provides an account of ethics that is commensurate with a restored account of Christian faith as the highest *telos* for human life. This paper does not mean to imply that we can or should instrumentalize such an account for the benefits of political life. The Climacus pseudonym, in his naïve emphasis on the meaning of individual human existence, is in this way a very good counterpoint to Johannes de Silentio, the pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling*, who indeed attempts to instrumentalize the primacy of faith over ethics for the benefit of political life. For my interpretation of this complex problem in Hegel and Kierkegaard, see Matthew Dinan, 'Kierkegaard's Socratic Alternative to Hegel in *Fear and Trembling*', *Review of Politics* 83.3 (2021), 375-97.

pecially any authentic embodiment of the political. Or, put somewhat more strongly: the political only comes into view once we have understood ethics individually. To return to our opening reflections on the way ‘the politics of...’ has become the preferred lens of the reflective age, we can disentangle politics from other expressions of the absolute, of *teloi*, of importance, of significance. If politics is not the absolute, this does not mean that it is consequently nothing. Moreover, the individualist inflection of Kierkegaardian ethics—and faith—does not mean that one is indifferent to others. Indeed, Climacus describes only the ‘how’ of ethics, not its ‘what’: his vision of the ethical is therefore perfectly compatible with Christianity, or a number of other of accounts of the ethical. Moreover, if Christian faith can only address itself to individuals, the point of this address is to direct the faithful toward passionate commitment to Christian ethics; thus, the emphasis in *Works of Love* becomes ‘You *shall* love your neighbour.’

But the demotion of politics from the ethical absolute to the association of individuals—the meaning and purpose of whose lives lay elsewhere—might be good news for politics. What is the political if it is not the absolute? It is an activity that human beings do together that sets up an authoritative community for managing the affairs of human beings in common. If, beyond the reflective age, individuals recover the passionate earnestness of true ethical life, we do not necessarily revert to the age of revolutionary foment but may instead design institutions that work in view of the need to avoid reducing human beings to the crowd or the public and recognize the individual as the locus of common life. And so, while Kierkegaard sometimes expresses half-hearted endorsements of the Danish monarchy and criticizes the republican movements of his day, he clearly shares the broadly anti-totalitarian concerns of Tocqueville, or—to cite a thinker inspired by Tocqueville and Kierkegaard alike—Hannah Arendt.

But Kierkegaardian individualism is relevant under any form of political organization precisely because of its careful limning of the forms of association and the habits of mind that collapse the individual into the unity of the political. In this respect, Kierkegaard’s concern is a Socratic one, and indeed coextensive with the Western tradition of political thought as inaugurated by Plato’s *Republic*. More mundanely, to return to the reflections that opened this

paper, Kierkegaardian individualism frustrates the attempted elision of knowledge of the political—on social media, in scholarship, or otherwise—with political action. Kierkegaard's goal is then not only to extricate ethics from politics, but from reflection, too. If our age is characterized by too much reflection, then one way to encourage a reorientation away from mass, speculative politics to the tasks of the ethical individual citizen would be, precisely, to turn endless speculation toward human existence, toward living a human life. If this is the case, then the Kierkegaardian recovery of the category of the individual may well accrue political benefits precisely in its insistence upon domains of significance that transcend the political.

