

Despairing over the Present Age

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DESPAIRING OVER THE PRESENT AGE: SØREN KIERKEGAARD AND
MODERNIZATION.

A Thesis

By

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Abstract

Despairing over the Present Age by Brodie Gilchrist – Advisor Robert Faulkner

19th Century Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard believed society alienates individuals from their true selves. Kierkegaard entitles this concept “despair.” As such, despair deals not only with Kierkegaard’s interpretation of the individual but also of the evolution of societies. While arguing that despair has existed throughout human history, this paper is an exploration of the ways in which modern or “Present Age” societies uniquely exacerbate despair according to Kierkegaard. This work begins with an in-depth look at Kierkegaard’s interpretation of the individual and of the self and then addresses the difference between modern and pre-modern societies. Analysis of Kierkegaard’s works concludes with a discussion of modern social institutions and their contributions to the problems of the present age.

Chapter 1: Introduction

19th Century Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard has been revered for his penetrating theological works. In addition to his theological treatises, Kierkegaard also wrote a series of predictions and warnings regarding the development of the present age and the social evolution of the individual. Specifically, he believes modern societies cause an alienation of the individual from his divinely intended nature. Kierkegaard places this individual in a state that he entitles “despair.” Despair represents the suffering of the individual in returning to their true self. His writing about the “present age” reveals a thoughtful study of the contrast between an emerging sense of modernity and the pre-modern world. This paper will examine both Kierkegaard’s concept of despair and his treatment of the present age in an attempt to address the question, how do modern societies uniquely exacerbate despair within individuals?

My study focuses on Kierkegaard’s *Two Ages* and *The Sickness Unto Death* as the two most relevant works. *The Sickness Unto Death* is Kierkegaard’s attempt to understand the “spiritual sickness” that applies to the individual in despair. Kierkegaard finds the modern individual to be an intersection of forces moving him in different directions. Freedom, necessity, and the eternal soul of the individual all influence his actions and decisions to varying degrees. As a result, there is no single interpretation of despair. Instead, it may take several forms and exhibit differing symptoms based upon the degree to which these forces interact within each individual. His analysis brings forward other fundamental concepts, such as the relationship between the individual and freedom, the basis for materialism, and the foundation for modern religious anxieties. The second

chapter of this work will be devoted to exploring Kierkegaard's conception of the individual, the foundation for despair, and the foundations on which the present age was constructed.

After engaging Kierkegaard's conception of the individual, I will turn, in chapters 3 & 4 to his work *Two Ages*. *Two Ages* attempts to understand the basis for the behavior of societies. Kierkegaard's *Two Ages* is framed around a literary review of Danish author Thomasine Gyllembourg's work of the same name. The first two parts of Kierkegaard's work analyze Gyllembourg's literary constructions such as setting and characters. The third and final section allows Kierkegaard to meditate on the main themes of Gyllembourg's work, particularly with regards to two specific ages and their respective institutions, organization, and dominant modes of thought. The two ages to which the title alludes, the Present Age and the Revolutionary Age, stand in stark contrast to each other and provide the reader with an excellent account of the development of modern societies. In his historical introduction, translator and renowned Kierkegaard scholar Howard Hong notes the surprise of present day readers regarding the pertinence of the thinker's claims. Hong states, "To many present-day readers the insights into the elemental trends in private and public life seem very penetrating and contemporary, a kind of prophecy from a solitary thinker of another century" (*Two Ages*, Introduction, xi¹.) This "solitary thinker" provides insight into many aspects of society including governance, economics, the press, the separation between public and private spheres, and the state of modern religion. My analysis of Kierkegaard's *Two Ages* will occur in chapters three and four.

¹ The format for citations which will be used throughout this examination for Kierkegaard will be as follows: (Book Title; Part, Section, Original Page Number)

The third chapter will focus on the delineations between the ages while the fourth will isolate three fundamental institutions of the present age in the press, the public, and the state.

The Life and Times of Søren Aabye

My study of the works of Kierkegaard begins with a brief exploration of his life to provide a context for his writings. Søren Kierkegaard was born the youngest child of seven to a religiously conservative family on May 5th, 1813. The society he was born into was far from perfect. Kierkegaard biographer Joakim Garff notes, “Exactly four months before Søren Aabye’s birth, the government [of Denmark] decided that the so-called currency notes, which could be redeemed for hard silver, would be replaced by notes issued by the national bank, worth only one-sixth of the face value of the original notes. State bankruptcy had arrived.” (Garff 8.) As a result of excellent financial planning and a bit of luck, the Kierkegaard family avoided economic hardship and remained one of the richest families in Denmark. Politically, Denmark was, and remains today, a form of monarchy². *Two Ages* indicates a decline in the legitimacy and power of this regime at the hands of public opinion. Religion, more precisely the Lutheran Church, was a state sponsored institution. The link between church and state became the focus of much of Kierkegaard’s later years of writing. Sections of *The Sickness Unto Death* foreshadow this by displaying modern religion as a form of “parrot morality” where the repetition of divine creeds is the only form of religious observance. While not being the subject of this

² The Danish monarchy became a constitutional monarchy in the mid 19th century after Kierkegaard’s publication of *Two Ages*.

particular examination, his criticisms of the interaction between church and state are similarly alluded to within the pages of *Two Ages*. Denmark still maintains this intimate link between state and religion.

Søren grew up a spoiled, mischievous, and sarcastic child despite frequently declaring (as would be seen in many of his letters and correspondence to other siblings and/or friends) his frequent mistreatment at the hands of his father. Prior to the age of ten, Kierkegaard witnessed the death of two of his siblings. This trauma to the family caused the father to take his “Jutland simplicity” to the extreme and outlaw toys in the Kierkegaard home, as they represented something too earthly and supposedly distracted the children from more important things. The headmaster of the school Søren attended said of the family, “Because the father’s home is thus such a model of industriousness, patience, and moderation, and is arranged in conformity with the principles by which children are trained in civic virtue and in God-given wisdom, he has enjoined his son [Søren] to view all things in light of the fear of God and a sense of duty, and to seek the source of all things in God as the fount of all wisdom” (Garff 27.) While differing accounts exist of the character of Søren as a child, the household in which he was raised was well documented and had a significant influence on his thought process and lifestyle.

His father Michael, a former merchant, was greatly involved in the lives of his children. He ran a very regimented and disciplined household, urging his children to reach their full potential in all their endeavors. Behind this ordered facade was a very troubled man who experienced nothing short of “torture” by his intimate knowledge and study of Christianity. Søren states, “The anxiety with which my father filled my soul, his

own frightful melancholia, the many things of this sort that I cannot even write down. I felt such an anxiety about Christianity, and yet I felt myself so powerfully drawn toward it” (Garff 15.) Garff notes that accounts of Michael Kierkegaard’s actual personality are scarce outside of recovered correspondence and Søren’s comments in his writing. As such, the accuracy of Søren’s account of him is not known to a full extent. Ultimately, few individuals were as significant to Kierkegaard’s life as his father. One such individual was Regine Olsen.

Kierkegaard, despite being an individual who was frequently coping with anxiety and despair, was not immune to falling in love. Around the same time that Kierkegaard’s father passed away, he became infatuated with a young lady by the name of Regine Olsen. Garff’s account finds Regine to be beautiful, compassionate, and brilliant. However, her youthfulness imparted a certain passion and lust that would be the cause of much tension and anxiety within their relationship, “...during the early part of their engagement he tried to cool down her amorous passions by reading her a sermon from Mynster [the Kierkegaard family’s preferred confessor] every week” (Garff 183.) Nevertheless, this did not prevent Søren from asking for her hand in marriage. Their engagement, however, proved to be tumultuous. At the time, Søren was preparing to begin his study at a pastoral seminary while completing his degree requirements. The course of their relationship and its effects on Kierkegaard’s writings are summed up by Garff, “Rather, it became a grand drama about the extremes in the intellectual history of the West: immediacy and reflection, sensuous desire and self-control, presence and absence. And even though Regine is not named one single time in the whole of

Kierkegaard's published works, she is intertwined with it like an erotic arabesque, full of longing, sometimes confronting the reader when one least expects it" (Garff 190.) Their troubled relationship would eventually end not, as commonly believed, as a result of Søren's overbearing anxiety, but rather as a result of a loss of interest on his part.

Ideologically, Søren's development began as a combination of his father's simplistic yet intellectual lifestyle coupled with his own personal educational experiences. Kierkegaard's encounter and subsequent involvement with the forces of modernity, for example, began shortly after beginning theological study. While still lacking in academic interest as a student, Søren became deeply involved in the workings of Christianity. He subsequently became very conscious of internal dogmatic tensions and inconsistencies that caused him to question the very fabric of Christianity. Such knowledge coupled with a keen sense of logic also drove Kierkegaard towards what Garff refers to as "godly awakening movements." He states, "Composed of roughly equal portions of reaction (back to true Lutheranism) and revolution (down with the power of the clergy as a ruling class in society), the godly awakenings were a threat to the State Church... Viewed politically, the godly awakenings were thus not unimportant in the development of modern democracy" (Garff 32.) These experiences, coupled with his involvement with the Danish press, brought Kierkegaard in contact with forces of modernity that had yet to be experienced by any previous generation. Kierkegaard considered these forces alongside the nature of man, and found a dangerous form of alienation in "despair."

Many thinkers' accounts of modernity include statements regarding the development of the natural sciences. However, such statements are absent from Kierkegaard's analysis. The sciences were not something curiously passed-over in Søren's life. Rather, he took the study of the natural sciences very seriously. At one point, he considered devoting his life to a study of the natural world. Garff documented one such passage in Kierkegaard's journals stating, "I have been inspired by the natural sciences and I still am, yet it seems to me that I will not make them my principal field of study. By virtue of reason and freedom, it is life that has always interested me most, and it has always been my wish to clarify and solve the riddle of life" (Garff 52.) The "riddle of life" he alludes to can be seen pointing directly to his study of the individual in despair and his search for identity. Søren frequently struggled with the abstract concept of identity as well as his own identity throughout his life. One of his meditations concerning this riddle of life provides a concise explanation of his search. He states, "What I really need is to be clear about *what I am to do*, not about what I must know, except insofar as knowledge must precede every action. It is a question of understanding my destiny, of seeing what the Deity really wants *me* to do. It is a question of find a truth that is truth *for me*, of finding *the idea for which I am willing to live and die*" (Garff 58.) For Kierkegaard, what one does and how one acts is largely indicative of whom one is. He would later identify this idea as the "true self." This search would become the idea that would define his life and greatly influence his writings as will be seen most in the next chapter, which examines *The Sickness Unto Death*.

Chapter 2: The Individual in Despair

Despair is a complicated subject for several reasons. Not only is Kierkegaard's interpretation of the individual extremely confusing for first-time readers, but they will also struggle to grasp the context and intent of *The Sickness Unto Death*. In consideration of the former, despite his seemingly poetic statements and the elegance with which he writes, many of his key themes are obscured by his rhetoric. Support for this can be found in the first few remarks of the first section, where readers are greeted by the following seemingly incoherent passage, "A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation" (*Sickness*; Part I, Section A, XI-127.) Only through further study does the reader come to gain knowledge of the two opposing dynamics of self, and how the overarching category of "self" is the relation of which he speaks. The object of this exploration of Kierkegaard's despair will be to bring to light these aspects of the self and how they could explain both the origins of and the driving force behind the present age.

The most effective way to study despair is through posing a series of questions and turning to Kierkegaard's work *The Sickness Unto Death* for answers. The answers to these questions will mostly emerge from Part One. Part Two is not expressly relevant to this work as it attempts to expose many of the contradictions and problematic areas of Christian dogma. The first question will necessarily address the linkages between the present age and despair and build a context for the definition and understanding of despair.

Why is despair a significant topic for study?

The universality of despair quickly becomes apparent as Kierkegaard's motivation for writing such a treatise. In the first few pages he states, "In any case, no human being ever lived and no one lives outside of Christendom who has not despaired, and no one in Christendom if he is not a true Christian, and insofar as he is not wholly that, he is still to some extent in despair" (*Sickness*; Part I, Section B, XI-136.) Much like the title of this section in *Sickness Unto Death*, despair is an absolutely universal concept. It is important to understand that despairing is not a concept unique to the present age. Rather, the new arrangement of society within the present age uniquely exacerbates despair and its problems within individuals. Additionally, Kierkegaard brings Christianity to the forefront through an assertion that despairing is both a positive and negative force within the Christian. It is a positive force insofar as Christianity affects the way the individual perceives and is ultimately able to cope with or seek alleviation from despair. Its negativity is manifest in the intense suffering and sorrow experienced by anyone attempting to seek the true self.

How does the present age exacerbate despair? Such a question would be difficult to answer without first knowing Kierkegaard's concept of despair and his criticisms of the present age. Despair is an issue of identity. The individual is an intersection of many different internal and external forces. While these forces act on the individual, the individual largely has the freedom to alter the degree to which these forces influence him. Through this act, the individual defines himself through the creation of an artificial identity and provisional self. Despair is precisely the difference between the individual's

provisional self and his true self³ and the problems that result from such a discrepancy. The present age has been arranged by these despairing individuals and caters to a very superficial alleviation of despair through treatment of the symptoms, rather than the “spiritual illness” (*Sickness*; Part One, Section B, XI-136) itself. This results in the further masking of despair in a veil of ignorance. This ignorance is a serious obstacle to identification and treatment of despair.

Studying despair also allows individuals to gain consciousness of their weakness and fragility. Kierkegaard follows the Christian belief that God creates each and every human being. Once humans are released into the world of freedom and possibility, they become fragile and weak. Weakness implies a lacking in ability to know or control oneself properly while fragility speaks to the inability of the individual to resist the allure of externalities. Evidence of both the fragility and weakness of the individual comes forth during a statement made in the concluding remarks of *Two Ages*, where Kierkegaard argues, “It will no longer be as it once was, that individuals could look to the nearest eminence for orientation when things got hazy before their eyes” (*Two Ages*; Part III, VIII-100.) Individuals turn towards institutions, organizations, and other individuals when “things get hazy.” One of the key themes behind *Two Ages* is a flaw of humanity in which individuals are wholly incapable of moving forward from a state of reflection to solve problems on their own, let alone gaining knowledge of their true identity. I will

³ Kierkegaard asserts that the individual wishes to be someone else. In any case where that is true, I will use the term “provisional” to apply to any constructed self (or rather any self that is not the true self.) God, in contrast, eternally grants the true self to each individual.

now look to Kierkegaard's work for a definition of despair followed by its symptoms and progression.

What is the concept of despair, what does it mean for an individual to be “in despair?”

What is despair? Initial statements of *Sickness Unto Death* stress the importance of the “relation” that is the “self” and what the individual should know about the self. The self is the all-encompassing term used to describe the divinely created individual. The true self, in contrast to the provisional self, is unchanging. Within this actual self, there are two different yet inexorably joined kinds of self: the physical elements (body and mind⁴) and spirit (*Sickness*; Part I, Section A, XI-127.) Both aspects of the self have certain independent and opposing characteristics. For example, the physical self represents finitude embodied in the earthly aspects of the individual. On the other hand, the spirit represents the infinite nature of the individual, or that link between God and man. Contained within the term “infinite” is the Christian belief in the eternal nature of our soul. The dichotomy between the infinite and the finite is essential to understanding the true nature of the self.

A further dichotomy between possibility and necessity allows for an understanding of the individual in relation to his world. Possibility is simply the capacity

⁴ These concepts are separated in Kierkegaard's analysis, yet are treated as one and the same thing: the earthly living portion of the self. In this sense, the mind is distinct from spirit insofar as spirit is the aspect of the self responsible for reflection, valuation, decision, and action. Much like the dichotomies seen below, the mind and body are somewhat “inanimate” aspects of the self that offset spirit, which is motion. In the following chapter, we will see how the present age, a society built around a masking of spirit, becomes passionless and loses the will to action, thus stagnating and foreclosing the possibility of even knowing despair.

of the individual “to be able to.” Necessity represents an inherent need in the individual “to become.” Of these two categories Kierkegaard states, “Possibility and necessity are equally essential to becoming (and the self has the task of becoming itself in freedom). Possibility and necessity belong to the self just as do infinitude and finitude. A self that has no possibility is in despair, and likewise a self that has no necessity... The self is potentially just as possible as it is necessary, for it is indeed itself, but it has the task of becoming itself. Insofar as it is itself, it is the necessary, and insofar as it has the task of becoming itself, it is a possibility” (*Sickness*; Part 1, Section C, XI-148.) Necessity represents the force that moves an individual towards his divinely granted self. Possibility allows for the individual to move from their provisional self to this true self. Kierkegaard explains that all these factors (possibility, necessity, finitude, and infinity) are organized into two main categories: limiting and delimiting. The limiting factors, such as finitude and necessity, are those concepts that place a strain on the freedom of the individual. It follows that the infinite and possibility represent and embody the freedom of the individual.

Freedom is a central theme in both *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Two Ages*. As seen above, the self has the task of becoming itself in freedom. What should be understood as Kierkegaard’s interpretation of freedom? He states, “Where, then, does the despair come from? From the relation in which the synthesis relates itself to itself, inasmuch as God, who constituted man as a relation, releases it from his hand, as it were – that is, inasmuch as the relation relates itself to itself” (*Sickness*; Part I, Section A, XI-130.) From the point where the individual separates from his creator, the self has the

possibility of despairing. This occurs when an individual accumulates knowledge and beliefs from his surroundings, which results in the creation of the provisional self that is fundamentally different than the actual true self. For this reason, the individual is responsible for knowing and becoming the self in a world of freedom and possibilities, a task that is much easier to accomplish in theory than in practice.

The way in which the totalizing category of “self” is related to these concepts insofar as their interrelation is concerned. When there is a known balance or harmony between these opposing concepts, the self may be seen and understood. However, when a “misrelation” (*Sickness*; Part I, Section A, XI-130) exists within the opposing aspects of the self (or relating itself to itself, to use Kierkegaard’s language), despair occurs. The term despair refers to a condition that results from an improper balance of the self. Ignorance of the self and of despair poses an even greater threat to the individual, as he cannot address issues of which he has no knowledge. This issue of ignorance brings urgency to a matter that spans the entire life of the individual. The individual must gain knowledge of the self in order to begin moving along the progression of despair towards its alleviation. Kierkegaard states, “Consequently, to be able to despair is an infinite advantage, and yet to be in despair is not only the worst misfortune and misery – no, it is ruination” (*Sickness*; Part I, Section C, XI-129.) Though one who is in despair experiences a form of spiritual torture, those who never know of despair do not have the possibility of progressing toward the liberation of the self. To the ignorant one, the true self despairs over its inability to emerge from beneath the provisional self. The question

that must be addressed next is: what happens to those individuals who are unable to find a way to alleviate their despair?

In one of the most moving passages in *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard reveals the severity of despair:

And when the hourglass has run out, the hourglass of temporality, when the noise of secular life has grown silent and its restless or ineffectual activism has come to an end, when everything around you is still, as it is in eternity, then – whether you were a man or woman, rich or poor, dependent or independent, fortunate or unfortunate, whether you ranked with royalty and wore a glittering crown or in humble obscurity you bore the toil and heat of the day, whether your name will be remembered as long as the world stands and consequently as long as it stood or you are nameless and run nameless in the innumerable multitude, whether you surpassed all human description or the most severe and ignominious human judgment befell you – eternity asks you and every individual in these millions and millions about only one thing: whether you have lived in despair or not, whether you have despaired in such a way that you did not realize you were in despair, or in such a way that you covertly carried this sickness inside of you as your gnawing secret, as a fruit of sinful love under your heart, or in such a way that you, a terror to others raged in despair. And if so, if you have lived in despair, then, regardless of whatever else you won or lost, everything is lost for you, eternity does not acknowledge you, it never knew you – or, still more terrible, it knows you as you are known and binds you to yourself in despair⁵.

The first thing of note in this account is the contrast with the various aspects of the “secular” world. One of the main themes running throughout the body of this work is the importance of the true self over the material goods, worldly honors, and other “distractions” embraced by the provisional self. These earthly desires belong to the first few stages of despair, or *immediacy*. Secondly, this quote provides the impact to a life

⁵ *Sickness*; Part I, Section B, XI-141

lived in despair: to be bound to the despairing self and cast aside by eternity. Kierkegaard calls this concept the “inability to die.”

The Christian Conception of Despair

The “inability to die” distinguishes despair from other fatal illnesses. While certain ailments and diseases can kill the physical self, sicknesses of the soul cannot. This is due to the soul’s eternal nature. Rather, Kierkegaard is considering the Christian conception of death, which extends the idea of despair past physical death and into the eternal life of the soul (*Sickness*; Part I, Section A, XI-131.) Kierkegaard believes that physical death causes an awakening in the eternal soul. If the individual dies while despairing, the awakened aspects of the self remain in a state of sorrow and confusion⁶ forever. The individual bound to himself has made the choice to accept his provisional self rather than suffering through the “ruination” of despair in order to know his actual self.

Christianity also affects the way individuals perceive despair. Kierkegaard believes that Christians, through teachings and scripture, have already been informed of their true self and are told of the dangers of holding their earthly provisional self. He states, “The possibility of this sickness is man’s superiority over the animal; to be aware of this sickness is the Christian’s superiority over the natural man; to be cured of this sickness is the Christian’s blessedness.” (*Sickness*; Part I, Section A, XI-129.) This takes his analysis one step further than purely ignorance and attributes despair’s “cure” to

⁶ For this reason, the term “despair” also refers to the sorrow felt by the true self concealed beneath layers of the provisional self.

Christianity as well. It follows that only one who is able to understand the purpose of life may make the conscious decision to walk that path.

What is the relationship between despair and sin? From Kierkegaard's perspective, despair *is* sin. He goes on to explain, "Sin is: *before God, or with the conception of God, in despair not to will to be oneself, or in despair to will to be oneself.*" Thus sin is intensified weakness or intensified defiance: sin is the intensification of despair" (*Sickness*; Part II, Section A, XI-189.) Despairing not to will to be oneself and willing to be oneself are two overarching categories that are used to organize stages in the progression of despair. To not will to be oneself would be the creation and subsequent acceptance of the provisional self and is embodied in the early stages of despair. The further one becomes involved in the search for the true self, the more he will to be this self. In both cases, the individual sins either through declaring that the true self, God's creation and gift to mankind, is unimportant or by creating a "fantasized" self through knowledge of the infinite possibilities of God. These stages of despair will now be considered.

Symptoms, Forms, and Progression of Despair

Despair affects the individual in a number of ways. As for "symptoms" of despair, the context is necessarily complicated due to the provisional self's masking of the true self. Kierkegaard draws an analogy to the medical profession and the relationship between the physician and the sick. In this relationship, the physician has the power to assess, diagnose, and prescribe treatments according to his own expertise. In other words,

the sick individual is unqualified to diagnose himself due to the proximity with the illness, and should rely on the physician for information (*Sickness*; Part I, Section B, XI-137.) Despair is exactly the opposite situation. Each individual must, in freedom and absent any external controls, understand his personal despair and seek the true self. Forms or symptoms of despair differ upon the basis of this “misrelation” within the individual and will be examined accordingly.

I will begin by isolating Kierkegaard’s delimiting aspects of the self, with analysis of the limiting aspects to follow. First, one form of despair is experienced through an excess of infinitude in their provisional self. The individual becomes lost in the infinite possibility of God, intoxicating himself with “fantasies” of what he might become (*Sickness*; Part I, Section C, XI-144.) It is further stated that this causes the self to become detached and abstracted, mimicking the infinite possibilities it perceives. The second delimiting aspect of the self is possibility. Similar to that of infinitude, an excess of possibility is met with paralysis on behalf of the individual. Possibility differs from infinitude insofar as paralysis occurs through an excess of earthly possibility as well as divine possibility. Kierkegaard states, “This self [one despairing in possibility] becomes an abstract possibility; it flounders in possibility until exhausted but neither moves from the place where it is nor arrives anywhere, for necessity is literally that place; to become oneself is a movement away from that place, but to become oneself is a movement in that place.” (*Sickness*; Part I, Section C, XI-148)

What factors oppose and constrain these delimiting factors? Finite aspects of man are those earthly components of the individual ranging from sense perception to worldly

desires and material possessions. An excess of finitude causes the individual to be unable to see past the provisional self to the possibility of the true divine self. Kierkegaard sums this point, “In fact, what is called the secular mentality consists simply of such men who, so to speak, mortgage themselves to the world. They use their capacities, amass money, carry on secular enterprises, calculate shrewdly, etc., perhaps make a name in history, but themselves they are not; spiritually speaking, they have no self, no self for whose sake they could venture everything, no self before God – however self-seeking they are otherwise” (*Sickness*; Part I, Section C, XI-148.) This form of despair surrounded in triviality is also called the “Philistine-Bourgeois” mentality. On the other hand, an excess of necessity would result in confusion. The individual has the will “to become” without *something* to become. This results in the individual becoming deeply involved in his provisional self through a lacking of possibilities. This individual cannot see any alternatives and grows in place rather than venturing to become his true self.

The difference between delimiting and limiting factors indicates the problematic nature of the freedom of the individual. When considering delimiting aspects of the self, it is especially true where the individual becomes stagnant in reflection over possibilities, causing him to lose any impetus to act. This becomes extremely problematic for modern societies that are built upon freedom of lifestyle, profession, and belief. Much of *Two Ages* is devoted to tracing the path of this problem from the individual up to the level of society on the whole. The limiting aspects of the self cause similar paralysis in the development of individuals. In other words, any factors which result in the individual despairing in excess forecloses the possibility of developing a more full understanding of

the self. These aspects of the self and types of despair will be found along the path which one follows in the logical progression through despair, and ultimately leads one to the crises where one must acknowledge the true self or be bound to their eternally despairing self. We now turn to the progression of despair. This begins with an examination of the forms of despair where the individual does not will to be oneself, or in other words, “despairs in weakness” (*Sickness*; Part 1, Section C, XI-161.)

The most common stages in the progression of despair are identified using the term *immediacy*. Two stages deal expressly with immediacy, the third is associated with the term *reserve*, while the final forms of despair are characterized as *demonic*, reflecting the intensity with which they are experienced. The first stage in the progression of the despairing individual is pure immediacy. Immediacy, in this sense, is akin to the individual who despairs through an excess of finitude. The *man of immediacy* is one who knows nothing beyond his secular and provisional life and has no conception of the true self whatsoever. More importantly, this man lacks reflection, which is a function of spirit (*Sickness*; Part I, Section C, XI-163.) Kierkegaard embraces two definitions of the concept of reflection that essentially refer to a process of “thinking.” Divine reflection held by the individual’s spirit may reveal a small aspect of the true self.

The man of immediacy gauges satisfaction of his life through superficial “happiness” attained through satiating earthly desires. If the individual becomes unhappy, he may self diagnose this as a state of despair. Unhappiness may occur for any number of reasons, such as the inability to satisfy one of these earthly desires. Instead of attempting to augment his state to seek greater happiness, the individual does not will to be oneself.

In this case, the individual wishes to discard his provisional self and construct another in its place. The will to discard the self, in this instance, is described by Kierkegaard:

The man of immediacy does not know himself, he quite literally identifies himself only by the clothes he wears, he identifies having a self by externalities (here again the infinitely comical). There is hardly a more ludicrous mistake, for a self is indeed infinitely distinct from an externality. So when the externals have completely changed for the person of immediacy and he has despaired, he goes one step further; he thinks something like this, it becomes his wish: What if I became someone else, got myself a new self. Well, what if he did become someone else? I wonder whether he would recognize himself. There is a story about a peasant who went barefooted to town with enough money to buy himself a pair of stockings and shoes and to get drunk, and in trying to find his way home in his drunken state, he fell asleep in the middle of the road. A carriage came along, and the driver shouted to him to move or he would drive over his legs. The drunken peasant woke up, looked at his legs and, not recognizing them because of the shoes and stockings, said: 'go ahead, they are not my legs⁷.'

For the man in the story, he was unable to recognize his new provisional self and suffered accordingly. If this man never passes beyond this first stage of despairing in immediacy, he will cripple and render the eternal aspects of the self powerless under the weight of the provisional self.

The next stage occurs out of nothing more than an instance of good fortune. If the individual, by some stroke of luck, engages the latent reflection of the self, a breakthrough occurs. Kierkegaard describes these resulting changes, "With this certain degree of reflection begins the act of separation whereby the self becomes aware of itself as essentially different from the environment and external events and from their influence

⁷ *Sickness*; Part I, Section C, XI-168

upon it” (*Sickness*; Part I, Section C, XI-167.) This is a very significant step in the right direction from Kierkegaard’s point of view. However, throughout Kierkegaard’s accounts of despair, few things have a more devastating effect on the possibility of progress towards the alleviation of despair than the trivialities of secular society. The individual may choose to abandon this path and return exclusively to the trivialities, honors, and distractions of secular life. Kierkegaard considers this regression in progress towards the true self as the worst form of “wretchedness.” From the eyes of humanity, this dilemma appears as follows:

There are very few persons who live even approximately within the qualification of spirit; indeed, there are not many who even try this life, and most of those who do soon back out of it. They have not learned to fear, have not learned ‘to have to’ without any dependence, none at all, upon whatever else happens. Therefore, they are unable to bear what already appears to them to be a contradiction, what in reflection in the surroundings looks all the more glaring, so that to be concerned about one’s soul and to will to be spirit seems to be a waste of time in the world, indeed, an indefensible waste of time that ought to be punished by civil law if possible, one that is treason against the human race, as a defiant madness that insanelly fills out time with nothing. Then comes a moment in their lives – alas, this is their best time – when they begin to turn inward. Then, when they encounter their first difficulties, they turn away; it seems to them that this path leads to a dismal desert while all about lie meadows fresh and green. And so they take off and soon forget that time, the best time of their lives – alas, forget it as if it were a piece of childishness⁸.

In this way, there is an ideological link between the concept of despair, or, more appropriately, the human response to despair, and the construction of the present age. Each individual, if they are able to perceive aspects of the self that appear in “glaring”

⁸ *Sickness*; Part I, Section C, XI-169

contrast to the surrounding secular world, must make the choice between an investigation of the self or a return to secular society. However, present age society has removed the incentive to attempt any “difficult” endeavor, causing individuals to return to secular society at the first hint of such difficulty.

As if the snares of the secular world were not substantial enough, another misconception could be responsible for relapses back to pure immediacy. In the section quoted above, the individual writes off his despair as being perhaps “a piece of childishness.” As this individual returns to his provisional life, he observes others and the decisions they make, offering a simple message of futility to those wishing to make a similar decision. Such an individual writes despair off as nothing more than misguided “youthfulness.” Kierkegaard notes, “As stated, this despair is the most common, so common that this alone explains the common notion that despair is part of being young, something that appears only in the early years but is not found in the mature person who has reached the age of discretion. This is a desperate error... No, despair certainly is not something that appears only in the young, something one outgrows as a matter of course...” (*Sickness*; Section I, Part C, XI-170.) The individual wishing to continue his journey through the progression of despair must not be disheartened or led astray by those entitling this as youthfulness. Instead he must persevere through consciousness and strength of reflection towards the truth.

If this individual manages to pursue his journey despite obstacles blocking the path through despair, he arrives at the next major stage of despair entitled *inclosing reserve*. It is important to note that *inclosing reserve* and *immediacy* function completely

differently. Such an individual is conscious of his previous turn towards secular life and the weakness that accompanied that decision. He is embittered toward himself and will not to be himself more intensely than ever before. The despair of the reservist⁹ is qualitatively different than that experienced by the man of immediacy. Kierkegaard refers to this transition as the transition from “despairing *in* weakness to despairing *over* one’s weakness” (*Sickness*; Part I, Section C, XI-172.)

The reservist, in contrast to the man of immediacy, largely keeps to himself. Kierkegaard portrays him as an individual who has enclosed himself, his search, and his sorrowful act of despairing within himself (hence the name “inclosing reserve.”) This spiritual and mental enclosure causes the individual to long for solitude. It is stated, “When it is done, when his longing for solitude is satisfied, he goes out, as it were – even when he goes in to or is involved with his wife and children. Aside from his natural good nature and sense of duty, what makes him such a kind husband and solicitous father is the confession about this weakness that he has made to himself in his inclosed [sic] innermost being” (*Sickness*; Part I, Section C, XI-176.) He is portrayed as a functioning member of society despite this occasional desire towards solitude. Once this is fulfilled, the individual returns to his life as if nothing occurred.

This turn inward is not indicative of the alleviation of despair although it marks significant progress. This progress is not without its dangers. Kierkegaard finds this capacity of the reservist to be fatal if taken to extremes. He states, “If this inclosing reserve is maintained completely, *omnibus numeris absoluta*, then his greatest danger is

⁹ This term is used by me and not by Kierkegaard. I use it to speak to the man in the state of inclosing reserve as shorthand.

suicide... But if he opens up to one single person, he probably will become so relaxed, or so let down, that suicide will not result from inclosing reserve” (*Sickness*; Part I, Section C, XI-178.) This confidant assists not only with a relief in pressure, but also as a medium through which the individual can sort out his beliefs towards a more effective pursuit of the truth. The rearranged individual reaches another qualitatively different stage in despairing revolving around a will to be the self, rather than a flawed provisional façade.

From here, the individual has transcended his previous weakness and now wills to be oneself or, more properly, the true self. This type of despair, contrary to willing not to be oneself, is characterized in a way similar to despairing due to an excess of delimiting functions of the self. When the individual wills to be oneself, the provisional self is eliminated and the until-now hidden infinite spirit becomes visible. The shock of this revelation may intoxicate the individual with the pure possibility causing him to engage in the construction of yet another artificial *ideal* self from this point. Kierkegaard states, “If the self in despair is an *acting self*, it constantly relates itself to itself only by way of imaginary constructions, no matter what it undertakes, however vast, however amazing, however perseveringly pursued. It recognizes no power over itself; therefore it basically lacks earnestness and can conjure forth only an appearance of earnestness” (*Sickness*; Part I, Section C, XI-180.) This individual despairs through an excess of the possibilities inherent in the eternal self, forming an *ideal* self rather than searching for the true self.

Alleviation of Despair

As one would expect, escaping despair is not simply a matter of consciously aligning the self. The first and perhaps most significant act that must occur in the acceptance of the self is an acceptance of God. This process of acceptance is termed “resting transparently in God.” Much like the process of despairing, the alleviation of said despair is a struggle. He states, “Moreover, it is very foolish and simply shows a lack of judgment as to what spirit is – along with a failure to appreciate that man is spirit and not merely animal – to think that faith and wisdom come easily, that they come as a matter of course over the years like teeth, a beard etc. No, whatever a man may arrive at as a matter of course, whatever things may come as a matter of course – faith and wisdom are definitely not among them” (*Sickness*; Part I, Section C, XI-170.) The individual evolves and develops over the course of his life, but his advancement in faith and piety only occurs through conscious effort.

Kierkegaard provides an explanation for the phrase resting transparently in God, “What is decisive is that with God everything is possible. This is eternally true and consequently true at every moment. This is a generally recognized truth, which is commonly expressed in this way, but the critical decision does not come until a person is brought to his extremity, when, humanly speaking, there is no possibility. Then the question is whether he will believe that for God everything is possible, whether he will *believe*” (*Sickness*; Part 1, Section B, XI-151.) Kierkegaard believes that the individual must acknowledge and understand his weakness in order to alleviate his despair. It is only when the individual is free from the self-important temporal world and various

incarnations of the provisional self that he is open to the abstract possibility and freedom of God. The self must necessarily find itself within these abstract possibilities. In despair, the possibility must always reflect the acceptance of God, which will protect the actuality, even if it is without hope. Insofar as this is true, faith must be accompanied by understanding. The virtue of understanding despair and the state of the individual has been stated several times in stressing the importance of knowing the balance of self and the dangers of ignorance.

From a contemporary standpoint, despair still remains an important subject for discussion. Not only is Kierkegaard's treatise about society's negative effects on the natural freedom of each and every individual, he also reveals the strife and psychological torment that occurs when the individual turns inward in a search for the truth. Additionally, this also gives the reader an understanding of Kierkegaard's belief in the natural religiosity of men. For these reasons, we now turn our focus to society as told through *Two Ages*. In doing so, we will move to a more broad analysis of society while keeping the overall picture of the individual constructed through Kierkegaard's analysis of despair in mind.

Chapter 3: The Two Ages

This chapter will begin an investigation of society through Kierkegaard's *Two Ages*. Many of his theories that emerge regarding society are still staggeringly relevant today. *Two Ages* was originally published under the title *A Literary Review* and indeed reviewed Thomasine Gyllembourg's *Two Ages*. Kierkegaard's *Two Ages* was originally published during a period of his life when he was considering abandoning writing. In the historical introduction, translator Howard Hong, states, "In a journal entry dated February 7th, 1846, just before the publication of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and *Two Ages*, he reiterated his intentions to become a pastor. But writing was in his blood and bone, and he artfully formulated a way out of his self-imposed stricture: he would write reviews. This, in fact, was what he was doing with Thomasine Gyllembourg's *Two Ages* – continuing his writing without being an author" (*Two Ages*; introduction, x.) His criticisms of the present age, specifically with regards to the public and the press, tell of an angry author who cannot understand the rampant secularism of modern society. It is no surprise that Kierkegaard debated taking a position outside of Copenhagen at a rural pastorate.

An "age" refers to an aggregation of time based upon dominant ideologies. The quantity of time contained within these ages is impossible to tell from Kierkegaard's analysis. A thorough dissection of *Two Ages* reveals two distinct possibilities. On the one hand, Kierkegaard's introduction paints ages as being similar to modern "generations." In this case, the generation he is documenting is his own. On the other hand, the inclusion of the dominant ideology seems to speak to trends that are far more wide reaching than

merely one generation of individuals, akin to “modernity” itself. In this context, an age is a statement of intellectual and social development over time that applies beyond the boundaries of a single community, but could encompass a nation or a whole region. Based upon Kierkegaard’s analysis of both the revolutionary and the present ages, I find this latter definition to be a more appropriate understanding of the term. In either case, this term is used to mark the transition from one set of dominant ideologies to another and the changes that accompany such a transformation.

Two Ages is a tale of a society in search of security. Security refers back to the investigation of man emerging from *The Sickness Unto Death*. Of specific interest is the man of immediacy, or that individual who is exclusively concerned with his earthly lifestyle and material possessions. This man, who identifies himself by his possessions, the clothes he wears, and the provisional personality he presents to the public despairs by willing not to be oneself. To be specific, this man only wishes to rid himself of his eternal aspects of the self. In doing so, he moves himself further away from his identity towards something that he describes as “safe” or “secure.”

This security lies at the very heart of what is commonly referred to as “existential anxiety.” The nature of this anxiety lies in a question. Simply put, how does the individual cope with the knowledge of his inevitable death? While the fear of death never expressly emerges in the two works studied, a careful reader will find many of Kierkegaard’s statements of despair attributable to meditations on life and death. On one hand, Kierkegaard stresses the importance of adhering to Christianity and finding one’s true identity, which is his eternal soul that finds death as a passing into life. On the other

hand, modern individuals are born into a society rich with secular lifestyles, possessions, careers, and objectives that serve to alienate the individual from the possibility of death and, at the same time, themselves. This alienation, which is despair, remains subconscious for the most part, leaving him free to pursue his earthly life. The present age is arranged in such a way that individuals are offered very tangible goals based upon quantitative means that allows them to feel secure through a secular understanding of “making progress” (*Sickness*; Part I, Section B, XI-140.) Progress then becomes defined based upon the desires and lifestyle choices of the individual. He states something very similar to this in consideration of the endless cycle of reflection within the individual:

This is why eventually not even a very gifted person is able to liberate himself from reflection, for he soon realizes he is merely a fraction in something utterly trivial and misses the infinite liberation of the religious life. Even if a small group of people had the courage to meet death, we today would not say that each individual had the courage to do that, for what the individual fears more than death is reflection’s judgment upon him, reflection’s objection to his wanting to venture something as an individual. The individual does not belong to God, to himself, to the beloved, to his art, to his scholarship; no, just as a serf belongs to an estate, so the individual realizes that in every respect he belongs to an abstraction in which reflection subordinates him¹⁰.

The individual, even in light of a supposed freedom of choice, remains bound to his trivialities that either prevent such venturing forth towards truth in identity or present this undertaking as the essence of futility. The individual is bound not only to his trivialities and provisional self, but also to the age itself.

¹⁰ *Two Ages*; Section III, Part 2, VIII-80

Theories on Decision and Action

Much like the previous chapter examined the motivation behind human behavior, this section will begin with an examination of the motivation behind the activity of the ages. This will serve as the foundation for most of the contrast between the two ages. Kierkegaard argues that there are two dominant social forces that compel an individual to act in “passion” and “enthusiasm.” Passion consists of any intangible force out of which opinions, or the degree to which an individual favors an object or an idea, are constructed. The most common examples of passions are desires and beliefs.

The other force that defines the behavior of the ages, enthusiasm, is whatever capacity the individual has to translate passion into action. In other words, it is *the will*, or the pure incentive behind acting. An enthusiastic age will constantly be in motion. Kierkegaard’s theories of passion and enthusiasm build a rudimentary foundation for differences of ages or nations based upon several factors such as political regime, religious observance, state of technological progress, general education rates, or relative wealth of nations¹¹. The present age lacks both passion and enthusiasm. Instead enthusiasm has been replaced by envy, which compels the individual to act not based upon any inherent impetus to act, but rather out of a jealousy of the progress or possessions of another individual. This follows from the rampant drive for possessions and material goods. In this age defined by a fierce individualism, all social relations become a form of competition in which individuals strive after more extravagant

¹¹ Kierkegaard’s criticisms and conception of the present age largely apply to the developed western world. More will be said about this in the fifth chapter.

trivialities. Envy is the basis of the process of “leveling,” which will be examined in the context of the press and the public.

Kierkegaard’s study of the motivation behind the actions of the age reminds the reader of the significance of freedom. This is one of the main links between *Two Ages* and *The Sickness Unto Death*. In both works, the individual is given freedom and must choose his own correct way to live. The individual despairs due to excess social possibilities and becomes paralyzed. In another sense, this individual despairs due to lack of divine possibilities, which results in his focus on secular trivialities. In order for the individual to move forward with his development as both a person and a member of society, he must necessarily gain knowledge of that paralysis and remind himself of his most basic necessities.

The Revolutionary Age

The first age spoken of by Kierkegaard is the Revolutionary Age. It is described as an essentially *passionate* age. Kierkegaard portrays it as nothing short of “romantic.” Battles are waged, riots ensue, and individuals give their lives for their beliefs. Erotic love is also a staple of this age. The nature of this age is rooted in the spirit of the French Revolution, “Having lived through one age, the age that felt the world-wide impact of Rousseau’s thought and of the French Revolution, and into the age of rationalism, Thomasine Gyllembourg could depict the advantages and disadvantages of both” (*Two Ages*; introduction, ix.) While Gyllembourg actually lived through the event itself, Kierkegaard writes from a time and place where the immediate effects of the French

Revolution are still being felt throughout much of Europe and finds this present age to be a stark contrast to its spirited clashes and social upheavals.

In spite of the romantic nature of the age of revolution, it is described using terms such as “form” and “culture,” which indicate the relative “strength” of the age.

Kierkegaard states, “The age of revolution is essentially passionate and therefore essentially has *culture*. In other words, the tension and resilience of the inner being are the measure of essential culture. A maidservant genuinely in love is essentially cultured; a peasant with his mind passionately and powerfully made up is essentially cultured” (*Two Ages*, Part III, Section 1, VIII-58.) In both the given examples, there exists a strong passion and enthusiasm in the face of substantial obstacles. Kierkegaard has carefully planned his choice of examples based upon his understanding of culture as a balance between resilience and tension. The maidservant loves despite holding a position in society that sequesters and alienates her from her partner. Similarly the peasant, the most common and unimportant of individuals, holds the most powerful opinion and pursues it passionately. The perseverance of these individuals displays an inherent dissatisfaction with traditional social roles manifested through the emergence of passionate emotions. This pattern is the culture of the age of revolution.

Passion has a direct correlation with the concept of “concretion.” Kierkegaard states, “When individuals (each one individually) are essentially and passionately related to an idea and together are essentially related to the same idea, the relation is optimal and normative. Individually the relation separates them (each one has himself for himself), and ideally it unites them” (*Two Ages*; Part III, Section 1, VIII-59.) This passionate spirit

creates ideals that serve as platforms on which individuals associate in “parties” and factions. The above passage stresses the dual nature of these associations. Concretions do not attempt to strip the individual of his identity and institute another but strengthen and encourage association through commonality. In this sense, passion regarding a certain ideology or cause is essentially the foundation for concretion. However, the present age’s lacking of passion has made association and concretion impossible. Instead concretion has been replaced by a form of individuality that lacks many forms of traditional interpersonal interaction found in the age of revolution.

Kierkegaard’s analysis of the age of revolution draws to a close with little more than the foundation for a comparative study of the two ages. While there is little discussion of political arrangements of the revolutionary age, there is sufficient evidence that it culminated in wholesale changes that increased the power of the individual and the masses relative to the state. A reading of *Two Ages* leaves one feeling that the “revolution” noted in the title is more than just an allusion to the French Revolution. It appears to be an age where individuals fought for their freedom, casting aside the structure-laden sociopolitical environment of previous ages in favor of the romantic pursuit of intangibles such as happiness, security, and love. Kierkegaard describes this, “The immediacy [of reaction] of the age of revolution is a restoring of natural relationships in contrast to a fossilized formalism which, by having lost the originality of the ethical, has become a desiccated ruin, a narrow-hearted custom and practice” (*Two Ages*; Part III, Section 1, VIII-61.) What is described in this passage is an age prior to the revolutionary age. While not providing a more detailed characterization of this age,

Kierkegaard believes this age retained its rituals, organization, and beliefs despite them having become a “desiccated ruin” of former passions and ideologies. The transition would have been a spirited and emotional outpouring of actions that, if it could be criticized for anything, would be its immediacy of reaction.

The Present Age

Whereas the age of revolution represented an age that was, if anything, all too willing to act, the present age stands in stark opposition as being utterly devoid of passion. Kierkegaard’s disdain for the character of this age is plain to see, not only in the body of his criticisms, but also in the changing of his rhetoric and the usage of more caustic language. His romantic portrait of the age of revolution gives way to an age of stagnation. He states, “The age of great and good actions is past; the present age is the age of anticipation” (*Two Ages*; Part III, Section 2, VIII-67.) The character of the present age is not acting, but rather anticipating the wars, riots, and passionate flares which were characteristic of the revolutionary age. What caused the transition between the two ages? Was this transition indicative of a universal condemning of violence in favor of peace? This is partially true. This transition was the result of a fear of wars and violence by those individuals who lived during the age of revolution and fought for their freedoms. Additionally, the despair that results from a meditation on death and other existential dilemmas and the political and social tendencies towards freedom that ushered in the age of revolution both contributed towards this movement towards the present age. The

present age then stands as a “stagnation” of freedom and equality amongst men that results in universal baseness.

Kierkegaard draws this contrast succinctly between the present and revolutionary ages, “An insurrection in this day and age is utterly unimaginable; such a manifestation of power would seem ridiculous to the calculating sensibleness of the age” (*Two Ages*; Part III, Section 2, VIII-66.) Calculating sensibleness is an accurate portrait of the intensity of the age. Further on, he very effectively characterizes the present age:

As an age without passion it has no assets of feeling in the erotic, no assets of enthusiasm and inwardness in politics and religion, no assets of domesticity, piety, and appreciation in daily life and social life. But existence mocks the wittiness that possesses no assets, even though the populace laughs shrilly. To aspire to wittiness without possessing the wealth of inwardness is like wanting to be prodigal on luxuries and to dispense with the necessities of life; as the proverb puts it, it is selling one’s trousers and buying a wig. But an age without passion possesses no assets; everything becomes, as it were, transactions in *paper money*. Certain phrases and observations circulate among the people, partly true and sensible, yet devoid of vitality, but there is no hero, no lover, no thinker, no knight of faith, no great humanitarian, no person in despair to vouch for their validity by having primitively experienced them¹².

When considered alongside the concept of despair as developed in the previous chapter, it is precisely this absence of despair mentioned which *is* despair itself. In other words, society has been arranged by those secular masses that wish to rid themselves of the eternal aspects of self and pursue exclusively earthly endeavors. For this reason, society has been entirely reconstituted to accentuate the earthly aspects of life similar to the individual that despairs willing not to be oneself.

¹² *Two Ages*; Part III, Section 2, VIII-70

In the previous chapter, reflection was thought to be an infinite benefit. It was one of the main tools used by the individual moving towards the alleviation of despair.

However, this account of reflection leaves one with an entirely different impression. It is stated:

Reflection's envy holds the will and energy in a kind of captivity. The individual must first of all break out of the prison in which his own reflection holds him, and if he succeeds, he still does not stand in the open but in the vast penitentiary built by the reflection of his associates, and to this he is again related through the reflection-relation in himself, and this can be broken only by religious inwardness. But the fact that reflection is holding the individual and the age in a prison, the fact that it is reflection that does it and not tyrants and secret police, not the clergy and the aristocracy – reflection does everything in its power to thwart this discernment and maintains the flattering notion that the possibilities which reflection offers are much more magnificent than a paltry decision¹³.

Kierkegaard makes it very clear that this is not the work of some oppressive social institution. Rather, this is a work of individual psychology magnified and applied to society writ large. It is a feedback loop created and perpetuated by both the individual engaged in reflection and the individuals around him. If the individual would be allowed to think about the ideologies and practices of the present age, he would realize how superficial and harmful they are, turning away immediately (*Two Ages*; Part III, Section 2, VIII-91.) This is precisely the power of the age. The endless reflections over possibilities deflect any criticism or blame that would attack the core of the age itself.

The concept of communication and interpersonal interactions also become integral to a study of the present age. Communication is based on two opposing states:

¹³ *Two Ages*; Part III, Section 2, VIII-76

silence and speaking. Silence is the place where ideas are synthesized appropriately referred to as “ideality.” Kierkegaard states, “For ideality is the equilibrium of opposites. For example, someone who has been motivated to creativity by unhappiness, if he is genuinely devoted to ideality, will be equally inclined to write about happiness and about unhappiness. But silence, the brackets he puts around his own personality, is precisely the condition for gaining ideality...” (*Two Ages*; Part III, Section 2, VIII-92.) On the other hand, speaking is the state by which an individual gives voice to the products of his reflection¹⁴ or ideality. As opposed to the other aspects of the self that are constantly engaged in a zero-sum struggle for dominance, the dynamic between speaking and silence is more of a process. As seen in the pages of *Two Ages*, the present age and secular society have modified this to include a third middling state entitled “chatter.” Chatter acts much like a “language” of the present age. This has two primary consequences: first, it ensures that reflection has yet another negative relation within the individual and second, it effectively breaks the line between the “private” and the “public.” The thoughts and reflections of an individual are his private possessions. The public mandates an active dialogue of trivialities that effectively halts the process of reflection and stifles the individual’s ability to contemplate. This chattering is akin to the modern “gossip” (*Two Ages*; Part III, Section 2, VIII-88), where nothing is above public scrutiny. Communication, therefore, has become another outlet for the power of the age through intervening in the meaningful thought process of individuals. Kierkegaard

¹⁴ Ideality in this context acts similar to reflection.

believes this is another mechanism inherent to the present age that further taints the reflection of the individual.

From here, one might ask the question, in this age devoid of passion where reflection paralyzes and imprisons the individual, why and how do individuals act? Kierkegaard states, “Principle, as the word indicates, is primary, that is, the substance, the idea in the unopened form of feeling and inspiration, and impels the individual by its inner drive. The person without passion lacks this; for him the principle becomes something external for which he is willing to do this or that or the opposite. The life of the person devoid of passion is not a self-manifesting and unfolding principle; on the contrary, his inner life is a hasty something continually on the move hunting for something to do ‘on principle’ (*Two Ages*; Part III, Section 2, VIII-94.) Kierkegaard here provides evidence that human action in the present age is the product of little more than boredom. Human nature, as argued by Kierkegaard, requires a degree of variation (*Two Ages*; Part III, Section 2, VIII-77). In a society devoid of passion, the individual seeks something to do purely for the sake of action.

Additionally, action and activity on an individual level have been transformed into things that appear “theatrical” (*Two Ages*; Part III, Section 2, VIII-69) Based on the “prison” of reflection constructed and maintained by the reflection of the individual and his peers, Kierkegaard conceptualizes the age as transforming all individuals into critics and spectators whenever an individual takes even the slightest action. This results from the growth of “the public” and the concurrent loss of concretion within society. In other words, the individuality and lack of passion have eroded formal and meaningful

association and left this “spectator” mentality in its place. Kierkegaard summarizes this age as one of “banquets.” The individual ventures forth in action and, if successful, is toasted and applauded. However, contrary to the revolutionary age, this celebration is largely superficial. Kierkegaard states, “In short, instead of being stimulated to being discriminating and encouraged to do the good by this festival of admiration, the celebrators would rather go home more disposed than ever to the most dangerous but also the most aristocratic of all diseases, to admire socially what one personally regards as trivial, because the whole thing has become a theatrical joke, and the spirited toasts of admiration had become the secret understanding that they could almost just as well be admiring themselves” (*Two Ages*; Part III, Section 2, VIII-69.) The present age, despite offering the individual more freedom and knowledge than any previous age, essentially stifles the development of the individual.

In this age marked by inaction, apathy, boredom, and other factors described by Kierkegaard as “aristocratic diseases,” what has become of religion? His criticisms remain rooted in the transformations of the revolutionary age towards freedom, individualism, and contempt for authority. Instead of maintaining its traditional beliefs and rituals, Christianity modified its doctrines to incorporate changes in culture and customs. He describes the case of religion to be much like politics, “We do not want to abolish the monarchy, by no means, but if little by little we could get it transformed into make-believe, we would gladly shout ‘Hurrah for the King!’ We do not want to topple eminence, by no means, but if simultaneously we could spread the notion that it is all make-believe, we could approve and admire. In the same way we are willing to keep

Christian terminology but privately know that nothing decisive is supposed to be meant by it” (*Two Ages*; Part III, Section 2, VIII-76.) The power of the public undermines both religion and politics by maintaining traditional rituals and structures while discarding passion, faith, and/or enthusiasm. Individuals would rather choose to ignore the will of the state or of God that would tax their freedoms than to suggest or take part in the construction of a new government. The present age now appears much like the age that preceded the age of revolution in which traditions and rituals were “dissipated ruins” of what they formerly stood for. This has been the foundation for a destructive “parrot morality” in which individuals are reassured of their salvation by the hollow repetition of religious passages thus annihilating any incentive for the individual to have spirituality (*Sickness*; Part I, Section C, XI-154.)

Chapter 4: Social Institutions – The Press, Public and the State

This chapter will present a more detailed examination of the present age through an investigation of three important social institutions: the press, the public, and the state. At the time of Kierkegaard's writing in the mid 19th Century, Copenhagen was only narrowly removed from the French Revolution. This violent uproar against tyranny and the "fossilized formalism" of Medieval Europe was felt throughout most European nations, including Kierkegaard's home country of Denmark. The masses finally realized their strength in a world where thinkers tore down ideological barriers such as the Divine Right of Kings. Further, this period found prominent French thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau authoring a series of influential discourses informing men that neither political regime nor property could alienate the individual from his natural freedom and liberty¹⁵. Kierkegaard similarly acknowledges the freedom of individuals before God. However, he believes that individuals frequently misuse this freedom through the construction of a secular society that only serves to mask a natural despair that all men must reconcile. The press, the public, and the state are three institutions of particular importance in fueling the masking process of the present age. These three institutions are related through their involvement with a process Kierkegaard entitles "leveling."

Leveling is a process resulting from a freedom of the press coupled with a strong "public." Leveling is a process of equivocation indicative of modern society's disregard for previous ages manifested through the envy that replaced the enthusiasm of previous ages. It is primarily found within the pages of the press. Within the literary world, this

¹⁵ Rousseau 49

process is one of revaluation where all published material is thought to have equal value. Kierkegaard states, “If an insurrection at its peak is so like a volcanic explosion that a person cannot hear himself speak, leveling at its peak is like a deathly stillness in which nothing can rise up but everything sinks down into it, impotent” (*Two Ages*; Part III, Section 2, VIII-79.) Plato¹⁶, for example, is considered to be on same level as the writings of present age tabloid magazines. Leveling also occurs socially through the homogenization of social classes into the public. Outside of the public, there are no other classes or associations, only individuals.

Like reflection, leveling is an essentially neutral process that may be used either positively or negatively. In fact, it is described as something positive in the religious sense, “That is the basest kind of leveling, because it always corresponds to the denominator in relation to which all are made equal. Thus eternal life is also a kind of leveling, and yet it is not so, for the denominator is this: to be an essentially human person in the religious sense” (*Two Ages*; Part III, Section 2, VIII 89.) Being “essentially human” refers to the true self that emphasizes each individual’s place before God.

The Press

Kierkegaard’s unofficial involvement with the press began with King Frederick VI’s decree of press censorship enacted in 1799. Many years later, members of the Danish intellectual community began to speak out against this policy as a serious obstacle to social development. In 1835, Johannes Ostermann authored an article on the subject published in the Danish press entitled “Our Latest Journalistic Literature.” Ostermann’s

¹⁶ Kierkegaard holds Plato and Socrates in high esteem. Despair is a concept based upon Socrates notion of the eternal soul. Evidence of this at *Sickness*; Part I, Section A, XI-134.

article advocated “tabloid” journalism due to its ability to give a voice to the lower classes (Garff 61.) Kierkegaard crafted a careful response to Ostermann’s article, attempting to draw the attention of prominent social figures. Joakim Garff states, “Kierkegaard’s contribution to the debate about freedom of the press was in fact a grandiose exercise in stirring up a tempest in a teapot” (Garff 62.) His response was read in front of an audience that included Ostermann and defended the state’s action as necessary in preventing the liberal party from encroaching upon state power. An anonymous author responded to Kierkegaard’s article with sufficient wit and literary expertise to intimidate Kierkegaard from the pursuing the subject further. Years later, in 1845, he became involved in a literary fracas known as the “Corsair Affair.” A negative review of Kierkegaard’s work appeared in the Danish journal *The Corsair*, causing Kierkegaard to respond with criticism of his own. The editors of *The Corsair* intervened, starting a campaign of literary belittlement targeting Kierkegaard. It is noted that Kierkegaard became embittered towards the Danish print media as a direct result of this situation, which contributed to his further authorship criticizing the free press (*Two Ages*; Introduction, x.)

Kierkegaard believed that the press was purely a vehicle for public criticism and slander. In this way, the public utilizes the power of the free press as a way to erode the legitimacy of its target. Kierkegaard uses an analogy of an attack dog to effectively state the role of the press in relation to the public:

The dog is the contemptible part of the literary world. If a superior person shows up, perhaps even a man of distinction, the dog is goaded to attack him, and then the fun begins. The nasty dog tears at his coattails, indulges in

all sorts of rough tricks, until the public is tired of it and says: That is enough now. So the public has done its leveling. The superior one, the stronger one, has been mistreated – and the dog, well, it remains a dog that even the public holds in contempt. In this way the leveling has been done by a third party; the public of nothingness has leveled through a third party that in and through its contemptibleness was already more than leveled and less than nothing. And the public is unrepentant, for after all it was not the public – in fact, it was the dog, just as one tells children: it was the cat that did it. And the public is unrepentant, because after all it was not really slander – it was a bit of fun. Now if the person instrumental in the leveling had been remarkably intelligent, the indolent public would have been deceived, for then the instrument would have been just another disturbing factor, but if superiority is kept down by contemptibleness and contemptibleness kept down by itself, then this is the quittance of nothingness. And the public will be unrepentant, or it actually does not keep the dog, it merely subscribes; neither did it directly goad the dog to attack nor whistle it back. In the event of a lawsuit, the public would say: The dog is not mine; the dog has no owner. And if the dog is apprehended and sent to the school of veterinary medicine to be exterminated, the public could still say: It was really a good thing that the bad dog was exterminated; we all wanted it done – even the subscribers.

Much like the nature of the public itself, the relation between the press and the public is purely artificial. The public acknowledges these publications primarily as a voice for lower classes or a vehicle for unfounded slander, yet turns to them in a bored search for entertainment. Ultimately, baseness of the press is a widely accepted fact. Kierkegaard portrays all individuals as equally thankful for the demise of the press at the hands of the educated few.

The Public

The press cannot engage in the process of leveling without the aid of the public. Kierkegaard describes the public as an abstraction. Within the public, all individuals equally share the power of society on the whole. Even the basest individual is of the most importance. In other words, the public is the result of a “cultural” leveling that operates by eliminating any delineation between classes. Outside of the public, individuals are isolated and each rises or falls based upon his own successes or failures.

During the examination of *Two Ages*, the topic of “concretion” came forth. Kierkegaard used the term concretion to describe a condition of association between individuals based upon mutual passion and/or beliefs. The revolutionary age had a significant degree of concretion due to the passionate character of the age. For example, Kierkegaard argues that the violent actions and wars that occurred in the revolutionary age resulted from parties and coalitions struggling for ideological dominance (*Two Ages*; Part III, Section 2, VIII-84.) Where the age of revolution was seen to have a large degree of concretion, the present age is completely devoid of concretion. The lack of passion in the present age correlates directly with the absence of concretion. Kierkegaard notes this relationship to be the foundation upon which the public is built. He states:

The public is a concept that simply could not have appeared in antiquity, because the people were obliged to come forward *en masse in corpore* in the situation of action, were obliged to bear the responsibility for what was done by individuals in their midst, while in turn the individual was obliged to be present in person as the one specifically involved and had to submit to the summary court for approval or disapproval. Only when there is no strong communal life to give substance to the concretion will the press create this abstraction ‘the public,’ made up of unsubstantial individuals who are never united or never can

be united in the simultaneity of any situation or organization and yet are claimed to be a whole. The public is a corps, outnumbering all the people together, but this corps can never be called up for inspection; indeed, it cannot even have so much as a single representative, because it in itself is an abstraction. Nevertheless, if the age is reflective, devoid of passion, obliterating everything that is concrete, the public becomes the entity that is supposed to include everything. But once again this situation is the very expression of the fact that the single individual is assigned to himself ¹⁷.

This understanding of the public is a very modern concept. Individuals have created an ever-present abstraction that serves as an artificial means of association. Contrary to the age of revolution that would have demanded allegiance to political parties, warring factions, or other social organizations, individuals in the present age have chosen to disassociate as a result of their freedom.

The nature of the public is fluid, containing varying numbers of individuals at any given time. Kierkegaard states, “For a few hours of the day he is part of the public, that is, during the hours in which he is the specific person he is, he does not belong to the public... The category ‘public’ is reflection’s mirage delusively making the individuals conceited, since everyone can arrogate himself to this mammoth, compared to which the concretions of actuality seem paltry” (*Two Ages*; Part III, Section 2, VIII-86.) Members of the public act “conceited” due to their power. This power is most easily displayed in Kierkegaard’s attack dog example where no component of society is protected from the destructive reach of the even the basest elements of society.

The presence of a public also has negative effects on future generations by removing the incentive and importance of labor and social status. Kierkegaard states:

¹⁷ *Two Ages*; Part III, Section 2, VIII-85

In this state of indolent laxity, more and more individuals will aspire to be nobodies in order to become the public... That sluggish crowd which understands nothing and is unwilling to do anything, that gallery-public, now seeks to be entertained and indulges in the notion that everything anyone does is done so that it may have something to gossip about. Sluggishness crosses its legs and sits there like a snob, while everyone who is willing to work, the king, and the public official and the teacher and the more intelligent journalist and the poet and the artist, all stretch and strain, so to speak, to drag along that sluggishness which snobbishly believes the others are horses¹⁸.

The public has dissolved class distinctions and subsequently the motivation for individuals to pursue excellence in their lives. Instead, Kierkegaard believes the public has caused a wholesale regression to the lowest common denominator. The “men of excellence” and those ambitious members of society are condemned to shoulder the burdens of society without the help of the masses of the public.

The effect of the public also spread to the ethical realm. More specifically, the individual is weakened from the abstraction of association. He states:

In our age the principle of association (which at best can have validity with respect to material interest) is not affirmative but negative; it is an evasion, a dissipation, an illusion, whose dialectic is as follows: as it strengthens individuals, it vitiates them; it strengthens by numbers, by sticking together, but from the ethical point of view this is a weakening. Not until the single individual has established an ethical stance despite the whole world, not until then can there be any question of genuinely uniting; otherwise it gets to be a union of people who separately are weak, a union as unbeautiful and depraved as a child-marriage¹⁹

Society has been reconstituted upon the foundation of leveling and “public opinion,” taking the accumulation of individuals as a symbol of “strength.” However, this

¹⁸ *Two Ages*; Part III, Section 2, VIII-88

¹⁹ *Two Ages*; Part III, Section 2, VIII-99

discourages the individual from forming his own ethical stance. If the individual was to gain valid a ethical opinion, it would create the means of concretion the present age is severely lacking.

Kierkegaard ultimately finds the public to be a very ironic entity. He views the artificial association of so many individuals as the ultimate exercise in absurdity. He explains, “And, the ultimate difference between the modern era and antiquity will be that the aggregate is not the concretion that reinforces and educates the individual, yet without shaping him entirely, but is an abstraction that by means of its alienating, abstract equality helps him to become wholly educated – if he does not perish” (*Two Ages*; Part III, Section 2, VIII-86.) In this passage the present age is painted as an all-or-nothing crisis where one must accept the alienating abstraction of the public or cast it aside permanently. In this sense, the public is the pinnacle of secular society. It is an entity that is so ethically destitute and base that it permanently divorces the individual from the possibility of finding his true self. This baseness, perceived by an individual venturing towards the true self, may deter regressions in development back to levels of pure immediacy.

The State

As expected from the above discussion concerning the public, this abstract entity appropriated much of the power traditionally held by the state. Kierkegaard supports this assertion by citing the changing of trends from times of antiquity towards a future where more democratic political systems reign. He states, “Formerly the ruler, the man of excellence, the men of prominence each had his own view; the others were so settled and

unquestioning that they did not dare or could not have an opinion. Now everyone can have an opinion, but there must be a lumping together numerically in order to have it. Twenty-five signatures to the silliest notion is an opinion” (*Two Ages*; Part III, Section 2, VIII-99.) Each individual may give an opinion to the public for support. Strengthening an opinion requires a greater quantity of individual advocates. If an opinion garners enough followers, it can achieve a status of “public opinion.” A few sentences later, Kierkegaard criticizes this concept of “public opinion” as no more credible or valuable than the abstraction that defines the public itself. Public opinion represents one of the measures of the public designed to appropriate political power away from the state.

The public’s power relative to the state is further referenced by the above attack dog example where no entity, not even one as powerful as the body politic of a society, is secure from the random harassment of the public via the press. This serves as one possible motive for the retraction of the state. Kierkegaard’s portrayal of politics centers on the “disappearance” of “men of excellence.” He states:

Whereas in older structures (relations between the individual and generation) the non-commissioned officers, company commanders, generals, the hero (that is, the men of excellence, the men prominent in their various ranks, the leaders) were *recognizable*, and each one (according to his authority) along with his little detachment was artistically and organically ordered within the whole, himself supported by and supporting the whole – now the men of excellence, the leaders (each according to his respective rank) will be without authority precisely because they will have divinely understood the diabolical principle of the leveling process. Like plainclothes policemen, they will be *unrecognizable*, concealing their respective distinctions and giving support only negatively – that is, by repulsion, while an infinite uniformity of abstraction judges every individual, examines him in isolation.

Men of excellence is a term used by Kierkegaard not only to speak to those in positions of political leadership, but also those individuals who have suffered through despairing and have gained knowledge of their identity. Their “disappearance” is indicative of two sides of the same point. It is both an ideological statement about the increasing political power of the public and their reluctance to occupy previous monarchic roles steeped in impiety.

This marks a link between despair and leadership that will be examined in greater detail. He states, “And not one of the unrecognizable ones will dare give direct help, speak plainly, teach openly, assume decisive leadership of the crowd (instead of giving negative support and helping the individual to the same decisiveness he himself has). For that he would be dismissed because he would be dabbling in human sympathy’s myopic ingenuity instead of obeying divine orders, the orders of the angry divinity yet so full of grace” (*Two Ages*; Part III, Section 2, VIII-101.) Kierkegaard here departs the realm of functional criticism to advocate his alternative to the present age. Those men of excellence disappear from view to avoid a seemingly inevitable state of impiety. Understanding these individuals becomes crucial to Kierkegaard’s treatment of how the age may undergo changes beneficial to all mankind:

Only through a *suffering* act will the unrecognizable one dare contribute to leveling and by the same suffering act will pass judgment on the instrument. He does not dare to defeat leveling outright – he would be dismissed for that, since it would be acting with authority – but in suffering he will defeat it and thereby experience in turn the law of his existence, which is not to rule, to guide, to lead, but in suffering to serve, to help indirectly. Those who have not made the leap will interpret the suffering act of the unrecognizable ones as his defeat, and those who have

made the leap will have a vague idea that it was his victory. But they will not be certain, because certainty could only come from him, and if he provides one single man with that directly, it means he is dismissed, for he would be unfaithful to God and would be assuming authority, because he would not in obeying God learn to love men infinitely by constraining himself rather than faithlessly constraining them by dominating them, even if they asked for it²⁰.

Kierkegaard characterizes those individuals who have consciously rejected the allure of secular life in favor of God and the true self as having made “the leap²¹.” This leap is the decision to believe and have faith regardless of the consequences. He concludes by dismissing his preceding statements as banter²². This could be interpreted as “banter” for readers that do not have any understanding of despair. In his ideal world, these individuals spark something of a silent revolution where individuals will understand and follow the example of the men of excellence as the correct way to live. The term indirect help then refers to leadership by example rather than formal rule. Kierkegaard states that such a society represents the sole means to defeat the power of the public and leveling and provide the individual with a head start along the path towards the alleviation of their despair.

²⁰ *Two Ages*; Part III, Section 2, VIII-102

²¹ The “leap” is a reference to the “qualitative leap” described in Kierkegaard’s *Concept of Anxiety*. In this case, it refers to those individuals who move from a state of disbelief to faith.

²² There are several points throughout Kierkegaard’s analysis where he is self-deprecating. This is especially visible in his statements at VIII-98, where he states that his analysis of the age will be added to a growing collection of prophecies and warnings, which indeed he characterized as hallmarks of the age. The difference between other authors and Kierkegaard is that he is quite sure nobody will ever take his warnings seriously or believe it as more than a work of prose.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Analysis

This final chapter allows me to reflect on the issues brought forth from Kierkegaard's two works. The first section will be devoted to summarizing and concluding discussions in the previous chapters. The second section will allow me to analyze and evaluate Kierkegaard's assertions in terms of their soundness and their relevance to modern society. Despite Kierkegaard's belief that his criticisms of the present age would not be relevant, his claims still accurately portray the state of modern societies. Not only does Kierkegaard accurately characterize the crisis of faith in the modern world in his discussion of despair, but he also witnesses a society gradually losing concreteness and a sense of collective identity. Additionally, his meditations on the freedom of the press speak to the complexity of the issue and reflect modern sociopolitical developments in information dispersal. Ultimately, modern readers of Kierkegaard will find his documentation of the birth of the modern era to be both surprisingly accurate and predictive of the evolution of modern societies.

What are the ways in which the present age exacerbates despair? The first and most significant way is through the arrangement of society around material goods and earthly concerns. When God releases the individual into the world of freedom, the individual follows a natural and inherent need towards "becoming." Societal tendencies towards secularity results in the creation of an artificial self that masks the divinely created true self. Instead of a society in which individuals pursue important matters such as knowledge of this true self, the present age is lost in the abyss of material goods and secularism. The one entity that can enlighten the individual, the Christian church, has

retreated from preaching the truth in favor of a derivative that appeals to the masses and takes little effort according to Kierkegaard. His works speak of a disappointment not only with humanity's choice of a path, but also in Christianity for its complacency with and complicity in the development of such a society.

Secondly, in addition to masking the true self, the emphasis on secularity also displaces the balance of the individual in favor of the limiting aspects of the self. This is reflected in Kierkegaard's belief that individuals in the present age rarely advance past a certain stage in their self-understanding. As such, the present age is portrayed as an age that has come to a standstill. The enthusiasm of previous ages towards something "higher" has been replaced by the base and tendencies towards envy inherent in leveling. Instead of factions fighting common enemies or individuals striving to seek the truth of the true self, individuals only struggle with one another over material possessions. Kierkegaard adds the disappearance of ethics to this diminishing incentive to act. His description of modern society appears as an incredibly elaborate and ornate arena in which combat occurs between beasts²³. To the victor go the most trivial goods and most superficial understanding of his existence.

Finally, despite his assertion of the universality of despair, Kierkegaard believes that individuals do occasionally resist the allure of secular society and seek the true self. The closer the individual comes to the true self, the more intense their despair becomes. The individual feels the sorrow and pain of the concealed self and becomes oneself through what Kierkegaard entitles a "suffering act." These individuals are very few.

²³ Kierkegaard finds individuals that have embraced secular society wholeheartedly to be no better than beasts, as they deny themselves the ability to be cognizant of their despair. See page 15.

Kierkegaard believes that once men become attuned to their true self, they disappear from modern society. This is based upon their recognition of the incompatibility between themselves and society and their wish to live as an example to provide others with the empowerment necessary to resist the pull of the present age. Modern society is viewed as impious to these men who may live among members of the public while ideologically differentiating themselves according to an awareness of the true self.

Kierkegaard leaves the reader with a series of suggestions for the improvement of society. First, the individual should not accept societal truths without first questioning their validity through reflection. The individual must trust his reflection, and look beyond the horizons of modern society in his quest “to become.” Secondly, the individual must have faith. He must *believe*, or “rest transparently” in God. This can only be accomplished through finding the true self. The inexorable link between God and man is known by the true self, which gives the individual who has alleviated his despair a sense of security. Finally, Kierkegaard believes solving the problems of the present age necessarily begins at the level of the individual. The “men of excellence” who are able to alleviate their despair live as examples to the rest of society, which will gradually move away from secularity. While not providing a vision of societal arrangement in a world without despair, it stands to reason that it will be very different from the movement and trends of modern society.

Analysis

Kierkegaard’s criticisms of the present age are rooted in a few key concepts. First, there is an inherent tension between the individual and freedom. Freedom refers both to

freedom before God (or “free will”) and societal freedom. Contrary to other influential theologians such as St. Augustine, Kierkegaard finds freedom before God to be a necessary condition of man. One seeking God’s plan must look to the actual self rather than awaiting his inevitable fate. Individuals have the possibility of experiencing despair from the moment they leave God’s hand. However, despair occurs when the society an individual is born into provides neither information nor incentive to find the true self. Despair then may be somewhat of a “divine test” to prove an individual’s devotion to himself and to God. The individual that reaches the end of his life in despair is bound to his despairing self and must suffer in sorrow for eternity. This enigmatic statement refers to the Christian concept of passing into life. When the human self dies, the eternal self awakens. If this eternal self remained concealed under layers of secular trivialities, it is condemned to remain this way forever.

As stated in my third chapter, *Two Ages* analyzes the individual’s search for security in an uncertain world. The inevitable death of human beings is the foundation of this insecurity. The drive towards secularity represents a search for this security. Kierkegaard believes this is both counterintuitive and “wretched,” representing movement in polar opposition to finding the true self. Instead of venturing to learn the truth of the individual made in the image of God, humanity has attempted to create society in its own image, conferring direction and meaning to the lives of its members. These individuals lack the possibility put forth from their eternal self and its link to the infinite possibilities in God. Necessity binds these individuals to a search to find value in their lives, yet without possibility they are unable to see the truth. Instead, individuals

keep constructing and maintaining the secular machine “on principle.” They are not encouraged to struggle or suffer for something higher – the priests assure them of salvation, their leaders have disappeared from view to avoid the scorn of the public, and their peers appear to be following the same path. Kierkegaard describes this lacking of proper incentive as the loss of “enthusiasm” in *Two Ages*. The individual despairs of his provisional self yet cannot see the incentive of the true self beyond the allures of secular society. On this basis, modernity alienates the individual from his true self long before he can choose to pursue it. It is then the responsibility of the individual to seek the truth in freedom.

Similar to the security/insecurity dilemma experienced by the individual, there is a noticeable focus on a perceived crisis between certainty and uncertainty. I believe this plays out through Kierkegaard’s analysis of the “prison of reflection.” When the present age individual reflects, he become intoxicated through excess of secular possibilities. The human brain, without the help of divine reflection, is too weak to evaluate and adequately process every choice available at any given time. This uncertainty then perpetuates inaction. Just when an individual appears as if he may be approaching a decision, Kierkegaard warns that this is the point at which he can and usually does collapse back into the abyss of alternatives. For this reason, the individual must rest transparently in God. God provides him the certainty of the self so that he may venture forth without fearing human judgment. Kierkegaard finds this judgment to be another major source of human impiety. Judgment and leadership is to be left to God, while the individual must devote his life to an investigation of who he is.

Despair is articulated as the case for religion in the modern world. The basis of proper religious life not is in devoting one's life to the solitary study of religious tomes, but simply in searching for the truth within one's self. The individual is convinced there must be some hint to his existence in the externalities around him, yet finds only the temples erected to secular society that yield little meaningful assistance. If the individual is given some sort of hint to examine the self, he reaches a state of crisis. Either he must examine this lead, which has the possibility of annihilating what he knows to be certain about the world, or discard this hint and be lost forever. The individual would rather cling to the certainty of what he knows and has experienced rather than brave the uncertainty of belief and faith central to understanding God and the self.

How was Kierkegaard able to gain such acute knowledge of the self? His family life was filled with tragedies and sorrow that constantly reminded him of the frailty and weakness of human life. Michael Kierkegaard taught his children of the impious implications of a life spent desiring trivialities at an early age by outlawing toys in their household. Upon gaining formal religious education, Søren was able to look beyond the written words of Christian dogma and the snares of secular society and begin the inward journey to the true self. He sought "*the idea for which I am willing to live and die*" in addition to the solution to the "riddle of life" (Garff 58, 52) As such, *Two Ages* is written from the perspective of a spectator of the present age rather than a participant.

The second form of freedom, societal freedom, is one of the most significant foundations of the modern world. Kierkegaard's treatment of the age of revolution speaks of the beginnings of this freedom. No longer were the masses able to tolerate the

structure-laden political regimes of antiquity that regularly exploited them. This culminated in the wars and revolutions that overthrew more than a political regime. This age destroyed the previous dominant ideologies and installed their own. For example, the masses laid down their lives for freedom during the French Revolution. Individuals had finally won a key battle ensuring what Rousseau fashioned as “inalienable rights.” More importantly, they were free to organize societies and structure their own lives accordingly. Kierkegaard notes that the present age, following in the footsteps of the age of revolution, marks the first generation of individuals able to enjoy the products of these revolutions without having taken part in the struggle and suffering that defined the age. As such, these individuals squandered their freedom without remorse, organizing a society based around an apathetic and bored “indolent laxity” inherited from the hard earned peace of the previous generation.

Kierkegaard’s portrayal of individuals and their “indolent laxity” leaves much to be desired. Danish society appears much like the popular story of the “Tragedy of the Commons” where the men of excellence are left to support the good of society on the whole. Present society has undergone significant changes, exhibiting many cases in which the bulk of the public labors for the benefit of a few individuals at the top of massive corporations. The present individual is a very productive individual who works in a very specific position within a highly developed and specialized division of labor. Attaining a slot in the modern job market usually requires the individual to seek forms of further education in his career field to stand out as a candidate. While lazy and/or parasitic individuals will be found in any age and social arrangement, present-day society

holds individuals to a high standard with regards to their “work ethic,” or their commitment to their careers. Employees in most modern companies are regularly screened to ensure maximum efficiency and may be removed from their position based upon their performance.

The second major theme emerging from Kierkegaard’s works is the erosion of value that accompanied this new generation of individuals. This is most prevalent in Kierkegaard’s treatment of religious life, where he criticizes the “parrot morality” of the modern individual. This parrot morality has eroded the very foundation of religious life by keeping traditional religious rituals and dogma in place, yet following them “on principle” rather than “in faith.” This is still problematic in present-day society, in modern incarnations such as the phenomenon known as “Cultural Catholicism.” I suspect Kierkegaard would see this as a continuation of the indolent laxity of the age in which he lived.

This form of parrot morality has also spread to the relationship of the individual with the state. The present age inherited the suspicion of authority and fierce individualism forged in the passionate conflicts of the age of revolution. These two factors sparked the development of the public, the third major theme throughout Kierkegaard’s work. The public is an abstraction. It embodies the freedom and power of the individuals as a significant political entity. It has appropriated much of the powers of state through the creation of “public opinion.” Individuals in Kierkegaard’s time were able to democratically decide “popular” issues through tallying of votes or accumulation

of opinions. Thus, individuals may declare their allegiance to the state while privately acknowledging their superiority over any governing entity.

Our present day culture has magnified the power of “public opinion” to the extreme through the creation of an “advertising culture.” This culture is a mix of capitalism and communication. It also speaks to the growth and evolution of “chatter” which Kierkegaard found blurs the lines between conceptions of public and private. The individual’s private space has now been almost completely annihilated through technological advancements in computers, telephones, television, and radio. All of these are either engaged in broadcasting a message or providing the individual with a means to associate with others. Modern private life has been confined to the term “home,” which is a place that the individual may encounter *fewer* intrusions from the public. However, the home is far from that place Kierkegaard found where individuals are able to synthesize thoughts through ideality and inwardness. Institutions and organizations now rely on the popular media to advertise their cause or product into every household. Political candidates spend impossible amounts of money attempting to penetrate into the “hearts and minds” of individuals – the two places that have yet to be commoditized. These candidates attempt to address the issues that are of greatest concern to the public such as the state of the economy or the environment. Public opinion largely still dictates the course of political action.

At the time in which Kierkegaard wrote, a free press was seen as a means of free speech. Johannes Ostermann in his defense of the free press stated the value of the press in allowing the lower classes to be heard. In present society, these issues are very

separate. The United States Constitution delineates between freedom of the press and freedom of speech as two different concepts. The “press” has expanded into the “media” which speaks to its exponential growth over time. Individuals may state their message if they have sufficient funds to pay for time or space (which has been commoditized) and their rhetoric is accepted by the publication. Regulatory bodies exist within present-day society, ensuring the messages reaching the public meet a certain standard of acceptability and inoffensiveness. Despite this “mass” media existing on the level of “big business,” the individual may still publish his views unhindered while garnering a smaller audience.

Finally, much like the present age, which hunts for things to do “on principle” from their bored and apathetic standpoint, present-day society exhibits a similar degree of disenchantment. This is particularly prevalent in younger generations, who frequently combat the routines of normal life by embracing “extreme” behavior, including dangerous variations of modern sports and recreational drug use. Much like the man in Kierkegaard’s example who does not recognize himself after venturing into town to buy new clothes and get drunk, the modern youth relies upon expressive clothing and chemical substances to assume new identities that are far removed from his true self. This new provisional self does not recognize the actual self, and ignores it resulting in despair. Additionally, society on the whole has exhibited signs of a possible correlation between the level of social development and psychological problems suffered by the individual. Advancements in the medical field have allowed for the creation of “mood-altering” substances ranging from those designed to alleviate anxiety within the individual to those

designed to make him more comfortable within his own life. At home, individuals seek entertainment through the media. Television programs, movies, and music are all preferred means for individuals to take self-professed “escapes” from their career-oriented lives. The actors and actresses that make these forms of entertainment possible are rewarded for their services with the opportunity to live an extremely wealthy lifestyle.

Despite Kierkegaard’s warnings about the dangers of modern societies, there are a few ways in which these changes have been beneficial to present-day individuals. For example, leveling has proven beneficial in a number of ways. For example, present-day Americans are considered equal under the law, providing weaker members of society with a legal safeguard against stronger individuals or entities. This has resulted in a sense of individual empowerment that individuals have utilized in order to fight oppression. The American Civil Rights Movement, for example, resulted in many changes of governmental policy and public opinion that began the country on the road to racial and gender based equality. While there is still much progress to be made, these changes would not have been possible without some form of cultural leveling.

Much like the “prison of reflection” and fierce individualism Kierkegaard warned of, individuals remain overly conscious of the opinions of others. Despite this, present society is regaining some degree of concreteness through renewed value on interpersonal relationships. This has evolved partially as a result of the modern “comfort zone.” This term applies to a group of individuals who are trusted based on relationship with the individual or their personal integrity. The criticism of these individuals is usually considered constructive and interpreted as a positive contribution to the individual

receiving this advice. The advice and criticisms of others are largely unwelcome in the modern individual, who takes pride in his individuality and his ability to know the best way to live. To this end, many modern organizations encourage the formation of communities and friendships to combat the isolative tendencies of individualism. Indeed, many present-day friendships originate from a common employment place or situation. Additionally, increasing population densities in urban environments has contributed to the formation of communities and a form of geographical camaraderie.

While many of Kierkegaard's criticisms are the product of extremely thoughtful meditations on aspects of the present age, there are two areas where his analysis is questionable. One major criticism of Kierkegaard's writing lies in his treatment of despair. Specifically, his account of the individual who has alleviated his despair leaves many questions unanswered. Once an individual has accepted the true self, balanced and moderated the forces in his life, and rests transparently in God, how is the individual to live? Could a scenario occur where the individual once again falls prey to the seduction of modernity and relapses into a life of sin? After the individual has become the true divinely intended self, does this satisfy his internal need "to become" and if so, what happens then? Does the individual who has disappeared from society completely isolate oneself or does he still have some interaction with secular society? Kierkegaard never addresses these concerns. Instead, his writing appears more interested in diagnosing the problem than providing a detailed solution. Perhaps it is the case that Kierkegaard believes the true self contains all the information necessary to live out one's life absent despair. If this were the case, it would be consistent with his belief that individuals

attempting to tell others the correct way to live are impious. In any case, Kierkegaard's treatment of a state beyond despair is incomplete. Secondly, despite Kierkegaard seriously considering a lifetime pursuit of the natural sciences, he does not include them in his account of the present age. This is especially confusing considering his statements in *Two Ages* indicating that the current age has access to more knowledge than any previous generation. In what ways and concerning what topics are individuals more educated? What implication does this have on the whole of society?

Certain aspects of society have changed since the time in which Kierkegaard wrote. However, his criticisms, warnings, and observations still hold a high degree of relevance in present-day society. These predictions also provide a contrast between the modern age in which we live and the pre-modern age. Kierkegaard has focused on those aspects of the modern age that alienate the individual from his true nature as a human being. While present-day society continues to essentially lead the individual astray, it has made some progress in appropriating those aspects of previous ages that were beneficial to all of humankind. As such, Kierkegaard's analysis remains indispensable to understanding where these societies originated and the motives behind their actions.

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