“Everything is Political”

A note on the critical poverty of liberalism

Anarchierkegaard

Sep 18, 2024

Contents

"In these times everything is politics."[1]

Kierkegaardian anthropology, sociology, and philosophy are rooted in an understanding of how separate entities relate to one another, firstly from the perspective of the concrete individual and the other, then the concrete individual to society, and then collectives to both other collectives and the broader social reality. All of this, of course, is always within the context of the God-relationship. The idea that S. K. was some kind of atomistic individualist or a "romantic-idealist" à la Kant or Camus is very much overblown, especially when taking his work as a whole. As Perkins noted, S. K.'s work that teeters on the ideal should always be held in tension with those that presume sociality:

> "This is what the apostle is talking about when he says that the Christian is not struggling with flesh and blood but with principalities and powers. This means that a Christian's existence radically affects life and thereby acquires the infinite ideality to set both heaven and earth in motion."[2]

Of course, each step on life's way here also requires an understanding of how these subjects—whether individual or otherwise—are genuinely related to God. Christ acts as a "mediator" for individual agents within any social setting, including those who are working towards common goals[3]. But, doesn't this take us back to the point of a radical individualist? If the individual responsibility to forge a relationship built on faith is of primary importance, doesn't the individual become atomised from reality in at least the initial step? We might be justified to believe this (and the list of very clever and very professional philosophers who have thought and even still continue to think this is longer than A's aesthetic reflection on Mozart[4]), but Barnett offers us a "corrective":

> "…to label Kierkegaard and his successors as "individualists" is to miss the point. In their rebellion against mass society, they are trying to preserve the possibility of free thought and of genuine interpersonal relationships. Kierkegaard's condemnation of modern "progress" and the tepidity of bourgeois Christianity is hardly a nihilistic attack; it is a recognition that "the 'goodness' of the good may in fact be the greatest religious disaster for a society."[5]

S. K. is not attempting to have us break out from the fact of an existent society with a history and a social reality, but rather that the totalitarian intrusion of a liberal democratic society—itself in its infancy in S. K.'s lifetime and already producing the media industry that would undermine any and all values any individuals might hold—has reduced the genuine potential for the liberation of "the individual" from the grasps of the class society of seriousness[6] and regiment to an unrooted passive bystander in the events of his life. The absolute relation, should it exist at all,

[1] *The Point of View*, p. 103, S. Kierkegaard

[2] Review of *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark*, p. 6, R. L. Perkins

[3] *Works of Love*, p. 55, S. Kierkegaard

[4] *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, p. 61–137, ["A"], ed. [V. Eremita]

[5] *Kierkegaard and the Question Concerning Technology*, p. 152, C. B. Barnett

[6] "A genius / a Christian", from *The Instant, no. 5*, July 27th 1855, from *Attack upon "Christendom"*, p. 160, S. Kierkegaard

is completely misoriented to something unimportant, or, at very least, not so important in the absolute sense that it should become the basis of one's life.

Thanks for reading Kierkegaardian Reflections. Subscribe to relatively relate yourself to my continuing ramblings.

The relation to the political

This brief exposition on the nature of the individual in mass society might strike you as strange in reference to the title, my reader. Where does "politics" enter into this? Especially for a thinker who was so opposed to brutish "politics", in the liberal sense, as S. K. was! The point here is to situate the nature of an "absolute relation" against a "relative relation"—understanding the way we can consciously order our relations through prioritisation and how, through the use of "the press", this order can come under assault.

What does "the one" mean by "everything is political"?

In S. K.'s pessimistic analysis of his contemporary Denmark, two categories emerged that are dangerous for the authentic individual and collective: firstly, "the one" and secondly, "the Crowd". My aim here, my reader, is not to provide you with a psychological profile of everyone you don't like. Bluntly put, this kind of pseudo-psychoanalytical approach is rarely interesting and even more rarely accurate. It is, of course, the bread and butter of the hack social critic—hopefully, my reader, you can understand my ire in that regard. Instead, we want to investigate the categorical nature of the existing individual in relation to the world around him.

Due to the relational nature between the individual and everything around them, we should remember that the average individual is a multi-faceted being; for most people, there appears to be no singular "essential self" that relates to all things in the world[7]. This is plainly apparent to everyone with a little reflection: the way that you interact with a baby, my reader, is (hopefully) very different from the way you would interact with a lover. Of course, this also applies to objects as well—the way we interact with a sophisticated work of philosophical grandeur such as *The Critique of Pure Reason* or *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is very different from how we deal with children's literature such as *Harry Potter* or Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*. We see that the way we interact with the world is fragmentary in the same sense that our sense of self is fragmented and multi-oriented. In the depths of aesthetic despair, we might follow Constantine Constantius in identifying the self as "not an actual shape, but a shadow—a variety of shadows"[8] that are simultaneously never an essential self which can be identified and also given reality in the concrete actions of our lives.

In some sense, the entire Kierkegaardian corpus can be considered an emergence from this Platonic cave of shadow-existence to the life of a genuine relationship with God[9]. Although the lack of an essential self might lead us to conclude that S. K. is merely a religious Sartre, an essence-denying critic who was simply too boneheaded not to throw out the last dribbles of the bath water to reveal the baby in all its existential purity, we would be incorrect to follow the vast majority of religious and theistic commentators from the pre-war period until the late 1960s. Indeed, to understand the path S. K. was clearing for us, we must reflect on the *failure* of "the aesthetic":

> "Be frivolous: turn yourself into several persons, parcel yourself out, have one view anonymously, another in your own name, one orally, another in writing, one as a professional view, another in private, one as the husband of your wife, another at the club—and you will see, all difficulties disappear, you will see that, whereas all men of character, and in the same measure as they are men of character, have found out and borne witness that this world is a mediocre world, a poor, wretched, depraved and evil world, you, however, will see, you will find, that this world is a glorious world, just as though it were contrived for you!"[10]

It is clear that, while the ethical is insufficient and the ethical-religious is similar to the aesthetic, the aesthetic alone—without God-leadership in Christ's prototype[11]—is also insufficient. A will to appropriate creation's beauty is incomplete when we have no inward grounding for that will because it necessarily leads to the "absolute-hopping" that is so beautifully explored in *Either/Or*, vol. I. This misrelation, when exposed to the actual reality of existing as a person with ethical relations to others and God, creates a commitment to non-commitment—a paradoxical way of life where a long-term commitment exactly of the type that A is trying to avoid is formed;

[7] "Jean-Paul Sartre: Kierkegaard's Influence on His Theory of Nothingness", M. Hackel, from *Kierkegaard and Existentialism*, p. 336, ed. J. Stewart

[8] *Repetition: A Venture in Experimenting Psychology*, p. 154, [C. Constantius]

[9] "Kierkegaard and the Critique of Political Theology", A. Rudd, from *Kierkegaard and Political Theology*, p. 25, edited by R. Sirvent and S. Morgan

[10] "Be frivolous — and you will see, all difficulties disappear!" from *The Instant, no. 9*, September 24th 1855, from *Attack upon "Christendom"*, p. 266, S. Kierkegaard

[11] "The Cares of the Pagans" in Christian Discourses, p. 42, S. Kierkegaard

he becomes the committed person, but negatively[12]. The despair of both the aesthetic and the ethical drives us forward to something else. *But* it is not a matter that we choose God as a way to run away from the terror of reality. William Lane Craig, an intriguing thinker in his own right, failed to understand S. K. at this point by practically turning the approach upside down: the Melancholic Dane did not thrust the gospel upon us as desperately forcing a placebo down our throats when all other medicine has failed, but, rather, that this *argument from despair*[13] shows us the signal to discovering the "proper" orientation with which we adopt.

But here, my reader, you might have noticed that we've played our hand: there is a correct relation, a correct absolute relation to the absolute, that liberal philosophers consider a conversation stopper and "a disaster in the context of a democratic society"[14]. For liberal apologists like Rorty, the idea that there is some kind of publically inaccessible relation is an affront to the very ground assumptions of liberalism: that there is something more important than civic duty, something more important than the state and the state's interference in one's life—S. K., with an ironical knife in the side, leaves the created culture relegated to a lesser position, a "relative relation", that those who see the absolute value of "the public sphere" to be the most important aspect of living in modernity cannot accept. In an inversion of the Abrahamic leap to the ethical-religious, the state manifests itself through the creation of an ethical demand, *das Sittlichkeit*, before throwing "the Crowd" into both aesthetic relations with non-stateful activity and nihilism in regards to anything within "the private sphere".

Instead of viewing the "shadow-existence" as a positive in which the individual successfully navigates a wide variety of social situations, we hold it sceptically—our scattered psychological existence is a sign of despair, sometimes even an unconscious despair[15], and, as such, we cannot view it as a positive expression of genuine freedom. The inconsistency of character brought about by aesthetic indifference to concrete meaning brings us to that burning Kierkegaardian question: "for what will you live and die?" In what sense does it seem reasonable to suggest that we can become "free selves" when the institutional environment so clearly discourages us from forming a genuine "self"? For those who have not chosen, having been brought to the edge by despair, to become a self, in what sense can we suggest that there is a self to choose at all in apparently self-identifying claims? To what extent can we view the state's applause at our self-discovery, along with the pressure of a biopolitical drive to make us a part of a larger, integrated socio-political unity, when this all seems to be directed towards the creation of consumptive habits instead of values?

[12] *Taking Responsibility for Ourselves: A Kierkegaardian Account of the Freedom-Relevant Conditions Necessary for the Cultivation of Character*, p. 228, P. Carron

[13] "An Analytical Interpretation of Kierkegaard as Moral Philosopher", P. Lübcke, from *Kierkegaardiana 15 (1991)*, p. 98

[14] R. Rorty, quoted in "Kierkegaard in the Context of Neo-Pragmatism", J. A. Simmons, from *Kierkegaard's Influence on Philosophy — Tome III: Anglophone Philosophy*, p. 184, ed. J. Stewart

[15] However, following Lübcke, I suggest we view S. K.'s identification of "unconscious despair" as a *category* in which the individual has the possibility for despair, not as an undiagnosed mental health condition. While S. K. was certainly a psychologist of sorts, I am sceptical of the view that he was merely handing out heavy-handed pseudo-medical advice.

The demand for blood and soil

The basic problem here for the liberal democratic society is that the individual *qua* existing individual is not someone who can be kowtowed into holding the values that are handed to them by the mass society. They are a menace to the democratic process in that they do not require the consent of the masses to act and they do not break so radically from reality that they can be marginalized. The Kierkegaardian subject stands beyond the prying claws of "the Crowd", beyond the groping tentacles of "the Press"—he is not a "shadow-existence" which can be quickly reoriented, reopinionated, and redeployed to new particular goals when new particular challenges arise. As evidenced by the ongoing Ukrainian crisis, American liberals leapt to the clarion call of the establishment when "the one" clapped—much like the populace had done so with the crisis in the wake of 9/11—there is always a possibility that a destabilising event offers the chance for "the one" to sow discord amongst any group of people and turn "the Crowd" towards a new absolute relation to the new relative goal that is identified.

Fundamental to the liberal understanding of the world, due to its existence as an organ of crowd-formation, is the "pincering approach" to subject management. While a more thorough exploration of this technique would be desirable, the most important aspect here for our purposes is the liberal inversion of the divine right of kings, i.e., the turn from a societally enforced absolute relation to an absolute monarch to an absolute relation to the relative, means that contradictory values held by the population are dangerous in modernity. An Abraham, a Socrates—these are the enemies of the modern government because they refuse to deal with the things they relate to on the terms of the related things. The stateful intent to turn their attention to stateful matters is completely undercut by their ironic relation of indifference to the imposing agent. Their "relative relation to the relative" shields them from the worst effects (but, of course, by no means all the effects) of propagandistic intervention, where the liberal state cannot demand a call to nationalist duty or fervour in the name of an enemy, as the individual's relation is not prone to the shock of a forced "jolt" of political action—their individuality and authenticity is protected in the prioritisation of "simple dialogue".[16]

As a reaction against this, the state must have the constant possibility—even if it is a chaotic and disordered possibility—to kick up enough dust for its cause whenever it needs the "vortex" to whip up[17]. This is the clearest domain of the sentiment that "everything is political": we are forced to engage with the intentions of "the one", the objective and objectivising sway of "the Crowd", by forcing the political and public, i.e., involved, aspect of all things into the foreground. While it would be ridiculous to imply that there is not a political aspect to, e.g., abortion, euthanasia, faith, war, etc., it is not immediately obvious why the individual and collectives of individuals should engage with them in political ways; Ellul, as a faithful Kierkegaardian, built a career on revitalising the utopianism of "Left-facing politics" (but not the period-conventional anarchism or Marxism) by insisting that the technical approach[18] is not the only approach—with sufficient will and within a sufficiently willful community, individuals and collectives of individuals can priori-

[16] *Propaganda: the Formation of Men's Attitudes*, p. 6, J. Ellul

[17] "Armed Neutrality, or My Position as a Christian Author in Christendom" in *The Point of View*, p. 134, S. Kierkegaard

[18] And, of course, political interference is one of the highest forms of the technical approach to life. One of the lasting contributions to the world of the Soviets is Lenin's political mastery, where politics went from a disorganised affair to a bureaucratic nightmare. See *The Technological Society*, p. 83, J. Ellul

tise aesthetic, ethical, or religious desires over the technical. Much like the greatsword producers of the Swiss soldiers in the pre-liberal period, with its seemingly random and certainly unscientific different forms—"hooked, racked, double-handed, hexagonal blades, fleur-de-lis, grooved, etc."—it is possible to live life outside of the demands of the political apparatus[19]. When we relativize the goals of the political agents that hang over us, then not everything becomes political.

I quote S. K. at length:

> In relation to an eternal happiness as the absolute good, *pathos* is not a matter of words, but of permitting this conception to transform the entire existence of the individual. Aesthetic *pathos* expresses itself in words, and may in its truth indicate that the individual leaves his real self in order to lose himself in the Idea; while existential *pathos* is present whenever the Idea is brought into relation with the existence of the individual so as to transform it. If in relating itself to the individual's existence the absolute telos fails to transform it absolutely the relationship is not one of existential *pathos*, but of aesthetic *pathos*. The individual may for instance have a correct conception, by means of which he is outside himself in the ideality of the possible, not with himself in existence, having the correct conception in the ideality of the actual, himself in process of being transformed into the ideality of this conception.
>
> For an existing individual the concept of an eternal happiness is essentially related to his mode of existence, and hence to the ideality of the actual; his pathos must be correspondingly qualified. If we conceive love aesthetically, we must acknowledge the principle that the poet's ideal of love may be higher than anything that reality

[19] *The Technological Society*, p. 72 J. Ellul

> presents. The poet may possess an ideality in this connection such that what the actual life yields in comparison is but a feeble reflection. Reality is for the poet merely an occasion, a point of departure, from which he goes in search of the ideality of the possible. The pathos of the poet is therefore essentially imaginative pathos. An attempt ethically to establish a poetic relationship to reality is therefore a misunderstanding, a backward step. Here as everywhere the different spheres must be kept clearly distinct, and the qualitative dialectic, with its decisive mutation that changes everything so that what was highest in one sphere is rendered in another sphere absolutely inadmissible, must be respected. As for the religious, it is an essential requirement that it should have passed through the ethical. A religious poet is therefore in a peculiar position. Such a poet will seek to establish a relation to the religious through the imagination; but for this very reason he succeeds only in establishing an aesthetic relationship to something aesthetic. To hymn a hero of faith is quite as definitely an aesthetic task as it is to eulogize a war hero. If the religious is in truth the religious, if it has submitted itself to the discipline of the ethical and preserves it within itself, it cannot forget that religious pathos does not consist in singing and hymning and composing verses, but in existing; so that the poetic productivity , if it does not cease entirely, or if it flows as richly as before, comes to be regarded by the individual himself as something accidental, which goes to prove that he understands himself religiously.[20]

While this is nestled in the Climacan comfort of abstracted reflection, we can see what is happening in the relation of our fictional character—grounded in the (rejected) knowledge of "the ethical" and the inwardness of that particular *locus* of life[21], the religious recaptures the possibility of the aesthetic in the pursuit of Christ's pattern, in the lesser *imitatio Pauli* (***1 Corinthians 11:1***), in the Anti-Climacan declaration: "Whether it now is a help or a torment, I *will* one thing only, I will belong to Christ, I will be a Christian!"[22] In the formation of an absolute relation, the (supposedly) political becomes relativised. We defend ourselves against propaganda—we defend ourselves against forced aestheticism. Much like Ellul's drive against the totalising twin forces of American liberalism and Soviet "socialism", we adopt a position that neither assumes an unbiased grounding nor allows ourselves to become swallowed in *das Sittlichkeit*[23].

The establishment-approved variety of worldviews is the edge of "the ethical"—but there is something impossible that lies beyond them. And to access them, we must insist that not everything is absolutely related to those approved worldviews.

> "Surrounded by hordes of men, absorbed in all sorts of secular matters, more and more shrewd about the ways of the world — such a person forgets himself, forgets his name, divinely understood, does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too hazardous

[20] *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments: A Mimic-Pathetic-Dialectic Composition — An Existential Contribution*, p. 347, J. Climacus, tr. D. F. Swenson, ed. W. Lowrie

[21] "A New Way of Philosophizing", from *On Kierkegaard and the Truth*, p. 54, P. L. Holmer, ed. D. J. Gouwens and L. C. Barrett III

[22] *Training in Christianity and the Edifying Discourse which 'Accompanied' It*, p. 117, [Anti-Climacus], ed. S. Kierkegaard

[23] *Money & Power*, p. 14–15, J. Ellul

> to be himself and far easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man."[24]

The negation of *das Sittlichkeit*

Because, of course, S. K. did not reject "the political" along with politics, we must pause for thought. What precisely does it mean to assert that "*not* everything is political"?

In our relations with the world around us, we have varying relative relations and an absolute relation—there are many things which we consider to be "interesting" and worthy of some of our time, but they are not the fundamental values which underpin our existence. As Tyson noted in his interest prolegomena[25], the "default" absolute value of modernity might be considered finance and money-oriented life goals; Ellul, prior to Tyson, noted that technological advancement and efficiency seemed to have taken root in the post-war period[26]; regardless of how we identify the "base" value of a particular society, the point to remember is that we are never without an absolute relation—we are always biased, we are always drawn into absolute relation with something via education and propaganda. Therefore, we should be quick to answer accusations of bias with a "bah!" of incredulity, seeing as how such idiocy is either so ignorant to be irrelevant or so intentional to be malicious.

These values, of course, are not "the idea for which I am willing to live and die"[27], in S. K.'s own flourish. We would like to think, I assume, my reader, that most people aren't willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for a few pennies more. This leads to a wider conversation on the degradation of the *quality* of relations in modernity, but that will have to wait for another day. My emphasis here is simply that the absolute exists in an insecure way—the average person in the swaying insecurity of modernity has nothing about their particular life that protects them from being ripped from *their* life and shunted into "the Crowd". The individual's relations are picked up and dropped at the snap of the fingers; "the new thing" is the perfect consumerist perspective as it allows for the creation of the perfect consumer when there is something to consume. This isn't a moral judgement, of course; we should not feel that not prioritising everything—and this could extend to art, family, drugs, food, etc.—or even anything in particular to the absolute level is some kind of qualitative failure of the agent. To insist that we constantly prioritise all things absolutely is to invoke a paradox: it is impossible for a person to orient their "intention" towards everything at once, even if that does mean that we would occasionally have to deprioritise beauty, nourishment, family, even God—something loses out when we make an absolute commitment, but the alternative is to make a series of lesser relative relations that fail to actually live it out. As Judge Wilhelm illustrates through romantic love:

> "[The fruits of love] come into relation with the ethical and the religious without having this happen by means of a reflection that altered it—since it is merely drawn up into a higher immediate concentricity."[28]

---

[24] *Sickness Unto Death*, p. 33–34, [Anti-Climacus], ed. S. Kierkegaard

[25] *Kierkegaard's Theological Sociology: Prophetic Fire for the Present Age*, Kindle location 1683, P. Tyson

[26] *The Technological Society*, p. xxv, J. Ellul

[27] "Gilleleie" from *Papers and Journals: A Selection*, S. Kierkegaard, ed. A. Hannay

[28] *Either/Or*, vol. II, p. 57, [Judge Wilhelm], ed. [V. Eremita]

Therefore, we must always make a choice. This absolute choice, so often abused in commentary on S. K.'s work, requires us to start from the basic assumptions that shape the way we view the world. But this choice is indeed absolute: we make the choice to place something in the absolute position unerringly; like Abraham, we hold our highest value in the highest without faltering[29]. The *leap* into a way of viewing the world, a way of life, does not destroy our other relations but transforms them into something else. To return to Rorty's worry about the Kierkegaardian figure, we cease to view *something* as relativizable and maintain an absolute relation above whatever *das Sittlichkeit* attempts to force upon us[30]—the socio-political insecurity of reality is treated with the ironical contempt that it deserves. We find no comfort in the unpredictability of "progress" in these matters, so we do not waste time becoming secular apologists for the establishment or the foolishness of theorizing a "science of history". We leave such childish comfort and fantasy to the Marxists.

"The Crowd" and Cretinism

Again, as is so often the case for Kierkegaardian thinkers, you and I, my reader, have found ourselves in the same category as the nihilists who refer to others as sheep. However, I offer some recourse here to avoid a life of self-righteousness objectivity and detached critique—we might as well become Hegelians if we are so disinterested in our ethical obligation to the other.

We remember Paul's advice to us: "speaking the truth in love, may [we] grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ" (***Ephesians 4:15***). The understanding of relations, the insecurity of relative relations, and the security of absolute relations is one which must be read through *possibility*. We always already have the possibility to change our worldview in this life, we always already have a choice to become "not what we are at the moment" and change towards a greater relation[31]. The infinite resignation of the Knight is not a negation and rejection of the world—it is the promise to affirm a *positive* relation to the world through God that empowers our lives. Much like S. K.'s view of his difficult relationship with Bishop Mynster, we should hold the other's ability to change in the highest esteem:

> "The possibility of this confession [from Mynster that his version of Christianity was not proper Christianity] had therefore to be held open to the end, to the very last moment. Perhaps he might have wished to make it on his death-bed. That is why he could never be attacked, and I had to stand everything, even when he did such monstrous tings as in the Goldschmidt affair…
>
> And everything is changed in my melancholy devotion to my dead father's pastor. For it would be too much if even after his death I could not speak more freely of him, even though I know well that my old devotion and my aesthetic admiration will always have a certain fascination for me."[32]

[29] *Fear and Trembling: a Dialectical Lyric*, p. 17, [J. de Silentio]

[30] "Enough is Enough! *Fear and Trembling* is Not about Ethics", p. 194, R. M. Green, from *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, Fall, 1993, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Fall, 1993)

[31] "Kierkegaard on faith and freedom", L. P. Pojman, from *Philosophy of Religion* 27, p. 43

[32] XI^1 A1

For as long as Mynster was alive, there was the possibility that he might renounce his false doctrine. Only in death is it possible to critique the other because only then is it possible to rebuke the other in totality—speaking truth in love can only happen when there is an *actual* other to speak with. As such, it appears that the apostle cuts across our worldly ways: in life, there is always the possibility that the other will make the absolute relation in a proper sense. We must speak that relation in truth, in the insecurity of "be[ing] out on the sea of thought, out on the '70,000 fathoms deep'"[33], in order to display the offence of Christ.

And this leads to our politically-oriented interest: what does it mean to relatively relation to politics and still take Christian political action that is absolutely related to the absolute? My reader, I leave you with an insight from Bartholomew Ryan:

> "The concept indirect politics is not multi- or trans-disciplinary because it is a negative space within each discipline; it is inter-disciplinary because it nevertheless demands attention from those disciplines by asking them to rethink themselves."[34]

[33] *Works of Love*, p. 363, S. Kierkegaard

[34] *Kierkegaard's Indirect Politics: Interludes with Lukács, Schmitt, Benjamin and Adorno*, p. 1, B. Ryan

Anarchierkegaard
“Everything is Political”
A note on the critical poverty of liberalism
Sep 18, 2024

<anarchierkegaard.substack.com/p/everything-is-political>