

# World that Matters

## Response to Poul Houe<sup>1</sup>

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The paper reads like an apology. It's an answer to those who'd say Kierkegaard leaves us "worldless". That his hang-up on the single individual and existential communication totally undermines ordinary give and take—human society.<sup>2</sup> The linchpin: A concept of history. Only a sacred past will change the West and its "rugged" ways it seems. My focus will be on the way Houe assumes a link here between transformative history and politics.

As a philosopher, I like being reminded about the weight of stories. Political philosophy has been caught up with reasons, rules, productive relations for too long. It's almost deaf to the role of storytelling in public. How cases are made here, arguing from commonly accepted elements and themes. How narratives are weaved together, by the players themselves, in real time too. There's nothing "irrational" about this. It's a form of shared deliberation, problem-solving in fact. Stories and characters inspire us; make us want to imitate them. These public, practical uses of history are all reasonable. They're found among early hunter gatherers, I believe, in Greek city states, in Northern Europe in Roman and Norse times, and in Modern democracies.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Matters that Matter: Kierkegaard, History, and the Historical as Facts of Fiction*. Given at the 6<sup>th</sup> International Kierkegaard Conference, St. Olaf College, 29<sup>th</sup> of June, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Some critical voices: Cavell, S., *Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy*, in *Themes out of School* (University of Chicago Press, 1988): 195-234; *Kierkegaard's On Authority and Revelation*, in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Cambridge UP, 2002): 163-79; Mackey, L., *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972 (a)); *The Loss of World in Kierkegaard's Ethics*, in *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Thompson, J. (ed.) (Anchor Books, 1972 (b)): 266-87; Marino, G., *Kierkegaard in the Present Age* (Marquette UP, 2001); *The Place of Reason in Kierkegaard's Ethics*, in *Søren Kierkegaard: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, Conway, D. W. (ed.), vol. 1 (Routledge, 2003): 166-79.

<sup>3</sup> For the Greeks, see Arendt, H., *The Human Condition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (University of Chicago Press, 1998); *Between Past and Future* (Penguin, 2006). Her take on politics as the sharing of words and deeds can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to these other societies that had (or has) a political life too. For the rise of the public sphere in the Modern state: Habermas, J., *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (MIT Press, 1991).

One problem: This isn't Kierkegaard's way of modeling things. He likes to say he's being true to Aristotelian categories of thinking. But Aristotle operates with three basic forms of human activity — not two<sup>4</sup>:

(1) *Theoría*, 'speculation' (keyed to mental virtues like *epistêmê* and *sophía*).

\*Contemplative. This kind of activity is insular, self-sufficient, private even;

(2) *Poiêsis*, 'shaping' (steered by expert know-how, the virtue of *technê*).

\*Transformative. This type of activity is unilateral, non-public;

(3) *Praxis*, 'doing' (voluntary, chosen); 'judging' (by deliberation, *phronêsis*).

\*Practical. This activity is public, genuinely two-way, community-oriented.

It takes place between free and equal agents; not between writers and readers, or patrons and clients, or rulers and subjects, or between armed prophets or divine apostles and their flock, or between God-men and their worshipper. It's absent from the Kierkegaardian corpus as a whole. It's always non-basic here — "fake".<sup>5</sup>

From an Aristotelian point of view of course, Plato (and Socrates too) was blind to the concept of praxis, or he assimilated it to theoretic insight and/or the master crafts instead. This made him blur the line between political life on the one hand and the academia, the household and the workshop on the other. For Aristotle that's a bad move. It means a complete leveling of politics, of active citizenship, and so of human agency itself. The public is turned into a grey, shapeless mass here that's being worked

<sup>4</sup> I'm drawing on Jacques Thaminiaux's first-rate work (*Poetics, Speculation, and Judgment* (State University of New York Press, 1993): 1-19, 154-7). Cf. Aristotle's *Ethics* 1094a; 1096b; 1147a (praxis); 1141b-1142a (*phronêsis*).

<sup>5</sup> The "other side of the isle" isn't disputing this either it seems. See e.g. Ferreira, M. J., *Asymmetry and Self-Love: The Challenge to Reciprocity and Equality*, *Kierkegaard Studies* 1998 (De Gruyter): 42-59; Søltoft, P., *Anthropology and Ethics. The Connection between Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity as the Basis of a Kierkegaardian Anthropology*, in Conway (2003), II: 277-84; Westphal, M., *Kierkegaard's Teleological Suspension of Religiousness B*, in *Foundations of Kierkegaard's Vision of Community. Religion, Ethics, and Politics in Kierkegaard* (Humanities Press, 1992): 110-29; *Commanded Love and Moral Autonomy: The Kierkegaard-Habermas Debate*, *The Kierkegaard Yearbook* (Walter de Gruyter, 1998): 1-22.

on by experts and people who claim to have superior insight and authority. A society that scraps interaction and sound judgment like this quickly falls prey to deception and fear—violence. This is the kind of society Plato gets, that he wants. To more liberal-minded thinkers though, that makes him a key architect of the closed society; of totalitarianism even.<sup>6</sup>

I think Kierkegaard takes much the same path. He has to in a way. He's trying to make Christianity a real factor in Western life and thought. The concept of *praxis* and real, citizen politics was lost early on in the Middle East it seems.<sup>7</sup> It isn't found anywhere in the Abrahamic religions. That's why Kierkegaard "forgets" Aristotle here. He may still be against Plato and Hegel: *Theoría* shouldn't be tied either to history or politics. They're all of one mind though in seeing both as transformative activities — *poiësis*.<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard's model is more "pure-bred" than theirs, more radical than Marxism too in a way. There's no plan sighted by Master Craftsmen on this picture, no human nature to be shaped by socio-historical forces.<sup>9</sup> Existence over essence, projection over reality, will over reciprocity:<sup>10</sup> This kind of thinking is bound to erase the line between the merely human or ordinary and the divine, pointing forward to people like Sartre and Fanon and key radical movements of the last 60 years.<sup>11</sup> It isn't that Kierkegaard's "poetic," faith-based history is dehumanizing or dangerous

<sup>6</sup> For Aristotle's digs at Plato: *Politics* 1261a-b; 1263b; 1265b; 1269a; 1274b; 1275b; 1277b (*phronësis* and ruling); 1278b; 1279a; 1280b. For the levelling of politics and the descent into totalitarianism: Arendt, H., *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Books LLC, 2009). For Plato as a theorist of the closed society: Popper, K., *Open Society and its Enemies*, 2 vols. (Routledge, 2002)

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Kuhrt, A., *The Ancient Near East c. 3000-330 BC*, 2 vols. (Routledge, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> For the link between Plato and Hegel, see Taminiaux (1993): 1-19, 127ff.

<sup>9</sup> For the notion of species-being and the mind as a product of society and history: *Economical and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, pp. 83-93; *The German Ideology*, pp. 150ff. (*The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Tucker, R. C. (ed.) (W. W. Norton & Company, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> Mackey: "Kierkegaard... says "it is the supreme glory of freedom that it has only with itself to do" [COD, p. 97]. But human freedom, thus absolutized, becomes indistinguishable from the omnipotence of God. Kierkegaardian freedom does generate its own possibilities" (1972(b): 283). See also Rumble, V., *The Oracle's Ambiguity: Freedom and Original Sin in Kierkegaard's The Concept of Anxiety*, Soundings 25 (Winter, 1992): 605-25; *Sacrifice and Domination: Kantian and Kierkegaardian Themes of Self-Overcoming*, Philosophy and Social Criticism, 20, 3 (1994): 19-35; *To Be as No-One: Kierkegaard and Climachus on the Art of Indirect Communication*, International Journal of Philosophical Studies, 3, 2 (1995): 307-21; *Eternity Lies Beneath: Autonomy and Finitude in Kierkegaard's Early Writings*, The Journal of the History of Philosophy, 35, 1 (1997): 83-103.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Sartre's *The Singular Universal*, in Thompson (1972): 230-65. For the ties between Sartre, Fanon, and revolutionary movements, see also *We Will Force You to be Free*, part 3 of the documentary *The Trap* (BBC, 2007).

necessarily. Christianity may well be a force for good in human society and in shaping group identity.<sup>12</sup> As a *political creed* though it isn't of much use: Our world doesn't need saving.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> I'm much impressed by the way Kierkegaard's writings acted as a refuge for individuals living under totalitarian, Soviet rule for example. See e.g. Máhrík, T. & Králík, R., *Kierkegaardove paradoxy a ich prorocký vplyv na myslenie v Strednej Európe*, in *Kierkegaard as Challenge to the Contemporary World* (2011).

<sup>13</sup> Democratic or open societies are based on separating political conceptions from illiberal, comprehensive doctrines (religious or secular). They go against *praxis*, negotiation, pluralism. That's because they demand total obedience or commitment (e.g. Rawls, J., *Introduction to Political Liberalism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Columbia UP, 1996)).