

Kierkegaard, *Ressentiment*, and the Present Age: Exploring the Contours of Social Deception



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If one were asked to name the great social philosophers of the nineteenth-century, Marx, or Hegel, or Comte would be among those who come to mind. If asked to identify some of the social philosophers of the nineteenth-century who offered an appraisal of mass society, or what might be called the herd society, others might be included such as Nietzsche. And their views would be fairly recognizable regardless of whether one had studied or had even read these authors. Hegel thought that the herd society was the consequence of an “unhappy consciousness” and pondered whether in the slave/master mentality, the master was actually enslaved to the slaves. Religion, in his view, did not help much with unhappy consciousness. Marx, of course, thought that herd society was the result of a false consciousness imposed on the masses by those who were in power through, in the main, financial influences and a capitalistic economic system. Religion fostered this false consciousness, tranquilizing the masses enroute to its offer of false hopes. Comte thought, following Hegel, that world history had finally arrived at the age of progress due to the advance of reason over religion and myth. Nietzsche contended that Christianity created the categories of virtue and morality due to the resentment (*ressentiment*) it had against those who were superior, and established a system of morality that took revenge of those who were superior. Religion fosters the conformity embedded in each of these approaches, and should, if humankind is to

advance, be left out of the realms of significance in culture.¹ And Kierkegaard would, for the most part, not be considered among the number of social philosophers who spoke into the issue of mass society. I want to contend that to exclude him from the number of those who wrote sophisticated social philosophical treatises in the nineteenth-century on the issue of mass/herd society is wrong headed.

The received tradition on Kierkegaard has considered him a philosopher for the individual with little regard for the problems of social existence. Marjorie Grene in her *Introduction to Existentialism* accuses Kierkegaard of the “simple disjunction of self and society” which produced an “antisocial temper” in his thought.² Fletcher cites a variety of philosophers who, when considering Kierkegaard, viewed him as an “extreme individualist” in the words of S.U. Zuidema. According to Fletcher, Zuidema contended that “Kierkegaard’s attitude toward fellowship and society is one of outright rejection, and the Kierkegaardian view takes exception to all social reform movements in its conservative individualism.”³ Together they see Kierkegaard as a “self-absorbed philosopher (peculiar in light of the notion of infinite resignation in Kierkegaard) in active opposition to any positive role for the interpersonal social and political aspects of human experience.”⁴ Even among those who have a perspectival affinity with Kierkegaard’s existentialism, this antisocial Kierkegaardian position is advocated. Take Martin Buber for example. In his work *Between Man and Man*, Buber discusses what he calls Kierkegaard’s idea of the single one. He does so against the backdrop of Kierkegaard’s break with Regina Olsen. Buber avers that Kierkegaard’s act is antipolitical and functions as a kind of retreat to monastic life where one can live solely in relation to God without concern for other relationships.⁵ He calls this a kind of schizophrenic attitude. In light of these comments, it is rather hard to conceive that Kierkegaard would receive a hearing as a social philosopher when the received tradition of understanding his ideas of individuality, inwardness, and subjectivity as anti-social prevails.

¹ There are many places in the works of the philosophers/social theorists listed above in which these ideas are expressed. In Nietzsche, one might turn to *The Genealogy of Morals*, or *Thus Spake Zarathustra* to see these themes pursued in light of *ressentiment*.

² Marjorie Grene, *Introduction to Existentialism* quoted in David Fletcher’s *Social and Political Perspectives in the Thought of Soren Kierkegaard* (New York:University Press of America, 1982), p. 2.

³ Fletcher, p. 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.3.

⁵ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1947),p. 52ff.

Herbert Marcuse in *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* takes particular aim at Kierkegaard's alleged hyperindividualistic anti-social philosophy. Marcuse contends that Hegel brought an end to the disjunction that prevailed in post-Cartesian philosophy between reason, society, and history. He did so by making reason a part of history; *logos* (reason) has an internal historical development realized through its dialectic. He writes, "Hegel had demonstrated that the material and intellectual powers of mankind had developed far enough to call upon man's social and political practice to realize reason. Philosophy itself thus made direct application to social theory and practice, not as to some external force but as to its legitimate heir. If there was to be any progress beyond this philosophy, it had to be an advance beyond philosophy itself and, at the same time, beyond the social and political order to which philosophy had tied itself."⁶ There needed to be a revolution in philosophy that accounted for the challenge posed by Hegel. Marcuse, in light of this contention of the need for philosophical work that is socially theoretical in nature, examines philosophical/social theoretical trends that provide a lens through which Hegel's insight might be developed within the nineteenth-century. Marx, in his view, seems the most fertile in this regard. But when examining Kierkegaard, Marcuse finds him wanting; his hyper-individualism gets in the way of speaking as a social critic cognizant of the moment afforded by Hegel. Marcuse wrote, "Hegel had demonstrated that the fullest existence of the individual is consummated in his social life," but Kierkegaard could not "get beyond" earlier approaches to philosophical and religious solutions to the problem of self and society. For Kierkegaard "every individual, in his innermost individuality, is isolated from all others . . . there is no union, no community, no universality to contest his dominion."⁷ This kind of individualism "turns into the most emphatic absolutism," unable to resolve the historical situation occasioned by Hegel's work. Ironically, he claims that Kierkegaard promoted a strictly negative philosophy the very thing one sees Kierkegaard advancing as characteristic of Hegelianism. Marcuse's view leaves us with an impotent Kierkegaard unable to negotiate his own age given his religious individuality.

In this article, I argue a different narrative, one rooted in the view that Kierkegaard provides a fertile social philosophical/theoretical perspective in response to the events of his day and his critics. I seek to do this by entertaining a particular part of Kierkegaard's *Two Ages*

⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1941), p. 257.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 264.

written in 1846. The section I have in mind is called “The Present Age.” This work examines the state of, the *zeitgeist* of the present milieu in light of the dominance of Hegel’s thought in Europe, particularly, in Denmark. It challenges the Hegelian devotion to reason’s preeminence, while not being anti-reason. Kierkegaard offers, or so I contend, a compelling analysis of the social, cultural, and historical situation of Denmark and does so as a sophisticated socially critical philosopher. Over against the Hegelian and Marxist notion of false consciousness as the herd’s failure to engage rationality and its assessment or pervasiveness of life, Kierkegaard proffers a view that asserts that the herd’s conformity is the result of deception, principally social deception and this deception is promoted tacitly by all members of society. He sees this as a failure of action, passionate action, perpetuated in society as a result of Hegelians dominance, not as a failure of one’s epistemic vantage point. I will explore Kierkegaard’s view that there is no reason for optimistic confidence in history’s progress applied to the public realm characteristic of the Hegelians or the Marxists for that matter. No, the public realm, as a consequence of the hegemony of Hegelianism and its allies in Marx and others, its antipassionate inaction, is actually a “phantom public;” it gives the appearance of conviviality, but, in the end, it is all smoke and deception. Further, I will do this by exploring Kierkegaard’s notion of *ressentiment* as the motivating ingredient in the socially deceptive environment about which he writes. This is the task I take up in this article.

**The Present Age as an age of social deception:
The Evasion and Suppression of the Truth.**

Kierkegaard offers a position on the state of society that differs from the false consciousness notions of Hegel and Marx, which they contend, produces the herd. I am suggesting that what Kierkegaard sees as the framework of the problem in the present age and its docility is social deception. Often when Kierkegaard is discussed, his view of self-deception is examined without considering the insights one might derive from the notion of social deception found in numerous of his writings. I suggest a different view. And so let me define social deception in a way that captures Kierkegaard’s use of it in the present age. Social deception shares the major features of self-deception only applied to the social order as a whole. In a Kierkegaardian sense, we might consider deception to be the motivated evasion or suppression of reality resulting in the failure of persons to choose actions. In this case, deception pacifies actors so that they do not act. The phantom public is the result of the existence of social deception in a given society hindering choice

and proper deliberation. Social deception uses certain strategies of engagement within the culture in the present age to solidify its influence.

Kierkegaard treats social deception in his writings in two ways: first as an overt, palpable, “hot,” to use Jon Elster’s language, engagement in social relationships, and secondly as a covert, less palpable, or “cold,” more subtle, mechanism in society. To illustrate the difference one might consider the section out of *Either/Or* called “The Diary of the Seducer.” In this tale, a man named Johannes concocts a plan, a rather elegant plan, although devious, to seduce a young, beautiful woman named Cordelia. Johannes sets out, knowing what he is doing, to deceive this young woman and does so by flattery, intrigue, and lies. In the social context of the day, Johannes learns everything he might about Cordelia so that his plan of seduction might be achieved. Cordelia is unaware of the ruse, and eventually falls in love with Johannes who, upon bedding her, the goal of the ruse, breaks off the relationship. He believes that he has created, through deception, the means through which Cordelia finds freedom; not in a person, but in choosing to participate in the plan, albeit deceptively, of the other. In this case the deception is overt and palpable, hot one might say, because, in this social setting, the deceiver is well aware of the “seducing,” deceiving the other. In the “Present Age,” deception functions much more covertly, but still with the same ingredients of motivation, evasion, and suppression of the truth.

The deceptiveness of the present age in the latter, less overt sense, is the motif investigated over and over again in the “Present Age.” Kierkegaard writes about this age that it “forms around him a negative intellectual opposition, which juggles for a moment with a deceptive prospect, only to deceive him in the end.”⁸ Also, the age uses a “deceitful escape” through outbursts of enthusiasm and humor to evade facing reality. This escape avoids the necessity of making a choice so that one might perform action in life. The present age is an age without passion and takes no action. These are evaded, misrepresented as unimportant, and suppressed in the present age. Why has this come about?

The present age is an age of reflection according to Kierkegaard, the primary culprit in establishing the conditions for social deception. By reflective age he means that people engage, *ad nauseum*, in thinking, rational engagement one might say as history, about issues without these engagements culminating in some kind of action. In reality, the goal of reflecting and deliberating in the dialectic of what it means to be human requires a termination, a point at which one makes a choice to act in

⁸ Soren Kierkegaard, Soren, *The Present Age* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), p. 34.

some specific personally committed way. It is a part of being human. But the current age is one of inaction, an age in which “nothing really happens.”⁹ This failure to take action, to engage in deliberative choice, creates a culture of indolence and complacency, the stuff of the herd. He writes of this age that it is “wearied by its chimerical efforts, relapses into complete indolence. Its condition is that of a man who has only fallen asleep towards morning: first of all come great dreams, then a feeling of laziness, and finally a witty or clever excuse for remaining in bed.”¹⁰ The age’s quasi-commitment to inactivity is due to its infatuation with and inculcation of Hegel’s dialectical reflectiveness, and this provokes its soporific attitude. Action, a necessary component of being human, is masked, evaded, escaped in the present age given its complacency. Reflectiveness encourages the indolence that characterizes the herd. It does so because, in the sense Kierkegaard uses it in his appraisal, people engage in reflection to avoid action.¹¹ Persons, or better ages, currently are in the perpetual state of reflection because action is too definitive. It is stressed over whether some decision or course of action will fit into the system; hence it promotes a neurosis. In an age where speculative rationality is viewed as the chiefly characteristic thing about humans, the place of action in defining humanness is vacated. In reality according to Kierkegaard, choosing to act is definitive in authentic living and is required in an association of persons, like a public. All must choose to take action for the society to flourish. Conformity, sameness, and the failure to commit are contrary to humanness. Social deception is the context of this loss.

The evasion associated with deception in the present is fostered as well by the passionlessness of the age. Kierkegaard writes of the age that it is “essentially one of understanding and reflection, without passion, momentarily bursting into enthusiasm, and shrewdly relapsing into repose.”¹² This present situation encourages the apathy and indolence characteristic of the present. Further, Kierkegaard claims that “our age is essentially one of understanding, and on the average more knowledgeable than any former generation, but it is without passion. Everyone knows a great deal, we all know which way we ought to go, but nobody is willing to move.”¹³ In a culture, a life without passion

⁹ Ibid., 35

¹⁰ Ibid., 34.

¹¹ Robert C. Roberts, “Some Remarks on the Concept of Passion, in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Two Ages* (ed. Robert Perkins: Macon: Mercer University Press, 1984), p. 92.

¹² Ibid., 33.

¹³ Ibid., 76

wrecks destruction on the whole of an era. It undercuts the moral fabric that undergirds a society or an age. He writes, "For, being without passion, it has lost all felling for the values of eros, for enthusiasm and sincerity in politics and religion, or for piety, admiration and domesticity in everyday life."¹⁴ Further, "an age without passion has no values, and everything is transformed into representational ideas."¹⁵ Without passion, everything is a representation of something else without the commitment that accompanies its presence. Humans without passion are herds, conformists to an age.

Passion, in Kierkegaard's view, is essential to humanness. At times this leads some to emphasized Kierkegaard's alleged commitment to irrationality. But, as Roberts' points out in his essay on envy, Kierkegaard has a rather sophisticated conception of passion. Passions may, on the one hand, be passive as when a small child feels fear upon hearing thunder. But, according to Roberts, Kierkegaard's conception of passion entails much more. Passions are connected with longings and desires, with aims and goals. A passion for union with God as the fulfillment of what humans are as *status viatoris* fosters one to perform actions that actualize the desired state. Passions are "motivations to actions." When they accord with reality, they function as complementary aspects of humanness in deliberative choice culminating in action. But without passion, there will be no actions, and consequently, no depth of character. Reflection does not serve its proper function in this scenario.

When reflection is divorced from its proper role of culminating in action with passion, superficial, deceptive forms of thinking prevail. Kierkegaard develops numerous examples of this sort of thing, but let me suggest two. One is the problem of rationalization, and the other is the issue of posturing. Kierkegaard uses publicity/advertising to illustrate how rationalization functions in the present, socially deceptive age. He writes,

Nothing ever happens but there is an immediate publicity everywhere. An expression of strength would seem ridiculous to the calculating intelligence of our times. A political virtuoso might bring off a feat almost as remarkable. He might write a manifesto suggesting a general assembly at which people should decide upon a rebellion, and it would be so carefully worded that even the censor would let it pass. At the meeting itself he would be able to create the impression that his audience had rebelled,

¹⁴ Ibid., 39.

¹⁵ Ibid., 40.

after which they would all go quietly home- having spent a very pleasant evening together.”¹⁶

Publicists write away the actual state of affairs through rationalized agreement with the present indolent age. Even the scholarly engage in deceptive rationalizations about intellectual matters. He writes that “the age of the encyclopaedists, when men wrote gigantic folios with unremitting pains, is gone. Now is the turn of those light-weight encyclopaedists who, en passant, deal with all the sciences and the whole of existence.” These scholars have “made a solemn resolution that the next generation should set to work seriously, and in order to avoid disturbing or delaying the next generation, the present attends to banquets.”¹⁷ At such events, the scholar gives the air of “seriousness,” without the least intention of committing passionately to an action.

Further, in a deceptive age, society poses in ways to give the impression that something significant has happened. He gives an illustration of the contrast between an age of inwardness where a crowd watches a person, in the face of death, go out onto some ice to retrieve a very special jewel. In this case the crowd would passionately applaud the person for his courage. Over against this is a passionless age in which folks would all “agree that it was unreasonable and not even worthwhile to venture out” far enough to retrieve the jewel. And so they might transform a feat of courage into a feat of skill.” He describes this in what is a rather humorous portrayal of the age posturing as if brave, yet not at all. He writes, “the crowds would go out to watch from a safe place, and with the eyes of connoisseurs appraise the accomplished skater who could skate almost to the edge (i.e. as far as the ice was still safe) and then turn back. The most accomplished skater would manage to go out to the furthestmost point and then perform a still more dangerous-looking run, so as to make the spectators hold their breath. His skill allows him to turn back while the ice is perfectly safe. For intelligence has got the upper hand to such an extent that it transforms the real task into an unreal trick and reality into a play.”¹⁸ A pose has been struck, cleverness wins the day and the crowd is pleased by all the excitement of the moment while it drowns in its complacency.

The age without passion and no action denies the individual of standing among other individuals. It is an age that not only rationalizes and poses, but is one that manifests a kind of dialectical deceit as well.

¹⁶ Ibid., 36.

¹⁷ Ibid., 36

¹⁸ Ibid., 38.

He writes that an age that is passionless turns every “expression of strength into a feat of dialectics: it leaves everything standing but cunningly empties it of significance. Instead of culminating in a rebellion it reduces the inward reality of all relationships to a reflective tension which leaves everything standing but makes the whole of life ambiguous: so that everything continues to exist factually whilst by a dialectical deceit it supplies a secret interpretation- that it does not exist.”¹⁹ One is enamored with the skill of the dialectician; but the challenge of making a decision to act is lost in the infatuation with the artistry of the dialectician. It is a negative dialectic because it diminishes important distinctions such as good and evil, encourages indifference, and treats persons as un-engaged, “third parties” to events and relationships that they are a part of by the fact of who they are. In the end, “money is the only thing people will desire;” there is not enough of a self to want ethically for more and, in the end will view money as his means of salvation.²⁰

The present age of social deception is, in the end, characterized as virtue-less and so the “springs of life”²¹ are cut off from individuals living in association with other individuals. In this virtue-less, socially deceptive age there are no more heroes to emulate, no more models to imitate, no more knights of resignation to follow; in the end, the present age is morally bankrupt without the reserves to question the deceptive ploys it imposes on itself. This age is “negative; it is an escape, a distraction, and an illusion. Dialectically the position is this: the principle of association is ethically weakening. It is only after the individual has acquired an ethical outlook that there is any suggestion of really joining together.”²² The present age, morally vacuous, hinders genuine social maturation.

The Present Age as Social Deception: Its motivation.

Earlier I claimed that deception is the motivated evasion or suppression of truth, and we have explored the strategies and evasions of deception implicit in Kierkegaard’s present age. In this section, I explore the motivation behind such evasive strategies like rationalization, dialectics, and posing. Throughout, the reality that has been masked in the social deception of the present age is the nature of the self, of the individual, who develops in association with other individuals in ways

¹⁹ Ibid., 42.

²⁰ Ibid., 40.

²¹ Ibid., 43.

²² Ibid., 70.

conducive to human flourishing. These relationships, along with one's life lived transparently before God, are necessary for human existence. Relating to the relation that one is is necessary to achieve freedom and genuine consciousness. The higher forms of the good life like unconditional love of neighbor require the development of virtue come about through inwardness, subjective commitment in choosing the truth culminating in action. But an age of inaction which is passionless produces empty characters, whose existence is ambiguous. There are no things in this indolent age that clarify what it means to be virtuous. When virtue is not promoted through inwardness, humans are hollow, superficial creatures who are charged by the immediate bursts of enthusiasm so characteristic of the age. This age does not appear to be at all desirable, so why would anyone in a right mind wish for such a thing? So, what motivates folks in the present age to evade and misrepresent reality?

Kierkegaard enters this question by positing that although "the established order of things continues to exist, it is its ambiguity which satisfies our reflective and passionless age. No one wishes to do away with the power of a king, but if little by little it could be transformed into something purely fictitious everyone would be quite prepared to cheer."²³ This suggests an attitude embedded in the present age that directs its life; it likes the images present in its current estate, but does not like the differentiations and distinctiveness entailed by these images. It likes to have a king or president or authority figure, but the age itself has a pejorative, negative mindset regarding what significant roles actually entail. The reason for this is that in an age bereft of virtue, certain vices come to dominate its character, to fill the void vacated by the good. In deception there is a masking of reality as I have contended, but in the masking of the present age, there is, what one might call, a flipping, an exchanging of virtue with vice. Virtue is necessary for society to function as individuals in relationships promoting the good. But in societies that have lost virtue, vice appears, (it is a phantom), as its replacement, and the society confuses one for the other. At one point Kierkegaard claims that this age of reflection without action makes "virtues into splendid vices."²⁴

Kierkegaard avers that the vice that has brought about this state of affairs is the deadly vice of envy. He writes that the reflective tension (i.e. the inability to act) "constitutes itself as a principle," and that "envy is the negative unifying principle" of the present age. In ethics, of course, a principle is a guide, a directive to action. In Kierkegaard's

²³ *Ibid.*,47.

²⁴ *Ibid.*,53.

analysis, envy functions as such a principle in the present age because its actions are “selfish within the individual and it results in the selfishness of the society around him, which thus works against him.”²⁵ Kierkegaard claims that envy is present in reflection and, as such, in the present age “prevents one from making a decision passionately.”²⁶ He warns that envy in this era “springs from reflection that imprisons man’s will and his strength.”²⁷ Envy renders one incapable of acting in any way other than the selfish orientation engendered by envy. Kierkegaard continues that one has to become liberated from “the bonds of his own reflection” to address the severity of envy as task master. And yet even if there is an initial recognition of the need to break free, the person is still not free in the present age. Kierkegaard writes “instead he finds himself in the vast prison formed by the reflection of those around him, for because of his relation to his own reflection he also has a certain relation to the reflection around him.”²⁸ He calls this a second imprisonment that can only be overcome by the “inwardness of religion.” This inwardness includes passionate action committed to the truth and manifested in virtue. The social order, the herd society rooted in envy, prevents, masks, evades the implications of what it would take to be delivered from its own bondage.

There is an insidiousness to envy that pervades and prevents a society to encounter the means necessary for its freedom. Kierkegaard avers that “with every means in its power reflection prevents people from realizing that both the individual and the age are thus imprisoned, not imprisoned by tyrants or priests or nobles or the secret police, but by reflection itself, and it does so by maintaining the flattering and conceited notion that the possibility of reflection is far superior to mere decision. A selfish envy makes such demands upon the individual that by asking too much, it prevents him from doing anything. It spoils him like an indulgent mother, for the envy within him prevents the individual from devoting himself to others.”²⁹ The presence and pervasiveness of envy creates the environment of hostility toward others that diminishes society and the public realm. In place of devotion to others, loving them as ends and not as means to one’s gratification, “envy surrounds (the age) and the person participates by envying others.” This envy is negative and critical; it is the principle that drives the age.

²⁵ Ibid. 48.

²⁶ Ibid., 48.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

The normative principle of envy in the present age becomes inculcated in the attitudes of society and produces a more profound, more subtle kind of envy which sets in dominating persons. This deeper kind of envy manifests itself in two levels, the second of the two being the more insidious. He writes that the “further it is carried (i.e. envy) the more clearly does the envy of reflection become a moral *ressentiment*. Just as air in a sealed space becomes poisonous, so the imprisonment of reflection develops a culpable *ressentiment* if it is not ventilated by action.”³⁰ *Ressentiment* is poisonous because it infiltrates all of society, neutralizing “all higher powers.” Culpable or moral *ressentiment* is the first level of envy’s hegemony in neutralizing the excellence of the morally good in the present age. Without the acknowledged presence of moral excellence realized in the genuine hero in society, all “that is low and despicable comes to the fore, its very impudence giving the spurious effect of strength, while protected by its very baseness.”³¹ As this baseness becomes dominate in society, it masks its own presence, it appears normal, customary, and conventional to live attitudinally in this manner.

To understand this first dimension of *ressentiment*, the deepening entrenchment of envy in society, Kierkegaard compares it with *ressentiment* from the ancient world. Envy or *ressentiment* is the attitude that disdains the fact that others might excel oneself or one’s society. It is fundamentally comparative; it recognizes some excellence present in something or someone outside one’s self and detests the thing or the other as a result. It wishes to be the one who excelled over the other. In ancient Greece, moral envy or *ressentiment* functioned through ostracizing those who were superior through death or exile. One can only think of Socrates, a hero of the ethical life to Kierkegaard, in this regard. Ostracizing the morally excellent was a “self-defensive effort on the part of the masses to preserve their equilibrium in the face of the outstanding qualities of the eminent.”³² He writes, “ostracism was the mark of distinction.”³³ Kierkegaard contends that even though the outstanding person was exiled, the culture still understood, dialectically, the moral superiority of that person. It was an act that acknowledged the morally good, albeit it detested it in *ressentiment*. Kierkegaard offers this explanation: “the ancient person admitted that his relation to distinction was the unhappy love of envy, instead of the happy love of

³⁰ Ibid.,49.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

admiration, but he did not try to belittle that distinction.”³⁴ Consequently, the motivation to mask the reality of the truth of the moral order is *ressentiment*.

But there is a second dimension of *ressentiment* that engulfs society as it is more pervasively reflects Hegelianism. He writes, “the more reflection gets the upper hand and thus makes people indolent, the more dangerous *ressentiment* becomes, because it no longer has sufficient character to make it conscious of its significance.”³⁵ Remember our earlier discussion of the absence of virtue and character that is the prominent feature of the present age. It gives credence to vice; it establishes the context for this more insidious *ressentiment* to settle into society culminating in the production of mass society. *Ressentiment* at this level turns everything into levity, a joke, cleverness, and banal, buffoonish humor. It does not wish to insult because to insult implies difference; to acknowledge difference suggests that something might be superior which might make one consider ethical categories anew. There is a cowardliness to this level of *ressentiment* that ensures a kind of vacillation in interpreting situations and issues. If insult is present, it is always self-referential; the other has offended one’s superiority. In our own day by way of illustration, how many times have we heard by commentators and pundits that such and such a politician is insulting our intelligence. If these strategies fail, the society dismisses any distinction as “nothing at all.”³⁶ Or it might turn to “witticisms” that obscure the possibility of moral satire as one sees in Kierkegaard own experience in the Corsair affair.

This profound, subtle dimension of *ressentiment* carries the principle of envy as the governing directive in the present age to an even deeper level. Kierkegaard claims that this “*ressentiment* becomes the constituent principle of want of character (virtue), which from utter wretchedness tries to sneak itself a position, all the time safeguarding itself by conceding that it is less than nothing.”³⁷ As its constituent principle, it encourages and promotes vice. This want of character in *ressentiment* fails to recognize the distinctiveness of moral excellence; in fact, it is blind to it. As such, it cannot see that “eminent distinction really is distinction.”³⁸ Further, it fosters a hostility toward distinction in moral excellence and the orders of society that symbolize excellence. Kierkegaard writes that it does not understand itself “by recognizing

³⁴ Ibid., 50.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 51.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

distinction negatively” as we saw in moral *ressentiment*. More so, it wants to “drag it (distinction and excellence) down, wants to belittle it so that it really ceases to be distinguished.”³⁹ All distinctiveness is devalued through *ressentiment* in a way that reminds professors of grade inflation or lawsuits against them when inferior work is identified as such. The social order is left with a kind of hyper-egalitarianism: the coach is the same as the athlete, the teacher the same as the student, the parent the same as the child. It is impossible to define honor because the pervasive presence of this level of *ressentiment* hinders its recognition.

The result of this vice dominating, placating the present age or the public square is devastating to humanity. As Aquinas contended, humans are constituted to be *status viatoris*, people on the way. To be on the way to the fulfillment of what it means to be human as God’s image bearers requires hope, that confident expectation that something promised by a reliable agent will come to pass. Built into humans is the capacity for hope; it gives us a vision for seeing what might be in the midst of what is because it recognizes the structure of the substance we are as *imago dei* in light of God’s promise. Hope is a part of life socially as well as individually. In Kierkegaard’s view, however, the dominate presence of *ressentiment* castrates the possibility of hope. How ironic in light of the Hegelian enlightenment position that progress is inevitable through rationality. It gives a false hope; or, in Kierkegaard’s view, offers no hope because it sets the condition under which this lowest level of envy, *ressentiment*, can and will prevail. Listen to Kierkegaard on this point: “*Ressentiment* not only defends itself against all existing forms of distinction, but against that which is still to come.”⁴⁰ Humans, without the hallmarks of moral excellence and virtue, are barren of hope in a hopeless world. It is tantamount to the destruction of society.

Ressentiment as the central motivation behind the social deception of the present age establishes itself through “the process of leveling.” Leveling is called an “abstract power,” one that makes an individual a mere abstraction. Leveling “hinders action,” stifles, and shuns any “upheavals” to the status quo. Leveling mistakes the essential feature of equality. Proper equality, in Kierkegaard’s view, renders individuals capable of achieving inwardness in an individuality that promotes moral excellence by extending its requirements to all. In other words, one must be inward, subjectively committed to truth and all can participate in this process because our existence is transparency before God. But leveling provokes a “negative unity of the negative reciprocity of all

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

individuals.”⁴¹ Leveling makes everything and everyone the same and it works through the institutions and negative values of society to ensure that the mediocre reigns, distinctiveness having already been compromised and lost. Because it is an abstract power, it engulfs all associations in society that might promote the true equality of individuals acting passionately and committedly in truth. Because it is abstract and reinforced by all manners of relationships and roles in society, it is near impossible to hold something or someone accountable for its exercise. Kierkegaard mourns that “the desolate abstraction of the leveling process will always be continued by its servants, lest I should end with a return to the old order. The servants of the leveling process are the servants of the powers of evil, for leveling itself does not come from divinity.”⁴² It functions like a modern bureaucracy; who in the end really knows who makes decisions that frame the outcomes of life in a bureaucracy.

Kierkegaard claims that the “abstract principle of leveling like the biting of east wind, has no personal relation to any individual but has only an abstract relationship which is the same for everyone.” Kierkegaard seems to be standing in the ancient tradition of political philosophy that claims that genuine friendships of virtue are necessary for a society to be sustained. In the present age given that vice reigns and virtue is lost, there are no relationships that, in friendship, promote, with good will, the excellence of the other. Relationships are abstract, maybe even utilitarian in encouraging mediocrity and not excellence. He continues that in the present age there is “no hero who suffers for another.” In religion, a person learns “to be content with himself, and learns instead of dominating others” to be comfortable in one’s status without considering someone else. Everyone’s contentment with oneself with no distinctions of excellence to challenge oneself demonstrates the equality of all persons before God. There is no challenge to be more. Society is left with “negative associations” that promote a notion of equality stripped of its content. The Press, education, and the church collaborate to promote the leveling process generated by the presence of *ressentiment*. Culture is left barren and hollow; excellent artifacts where ever they might be found are devalued as a result of envy and its manifestation in the two levels of *ressentiment*. The public is a phantom indeed.

I have suggested in this article that the received tradition’s conception of Kierkegaard as a conservative individualist just does not meet up with the Kierkegaard we see in *Two Ages*. I have contended that the herd mentality discussed in the nineteenth-century is illuminated

⁴¹ Ibid., 52

⁴² Ibid., 42.

through his examination of the present age, and gives us an image of the ways in which social deception function to create the phantom public about which he wrote. I argue that in the place of virtue, the vice of envy in its various iterations dominates and promotes the mass/herd/ish/conformist society that worried nineteenth-century philosophers and social theorists. I offer Kierkegaard as an alternative account of the demise of the public realm through the presence of social deception in the present age.