

The Eschatological Turn in Early 20th-Century German Philosophy

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Introduction¹

It is a guiding assumption of this essay that the scepticism regarding revelation that was such a central characteristic of the Enlightenment did not eradicate the importance of eschatology as a structuring frame of historical and moral thought, but merely changed it. In pre-17th-century Christian thought, the last things were paradigmatically *revealed* knowledge: it was from the dominical sayings and actions, and from biblical (and sometimes extra-biblical) prophecy, that the divine plan of salvation and judgement was known – a plan wrought and revealed by a sovereign God, which could not have been predicted, but which, once revealed, must determine any understanding of historical and moral ends. The Enlightenment crisis of revelation was therefore first and foremost a crisis of eschatology. If Christian morality and world history were determined by their end, and the possibility of knowledge of that end was radically in question, how should one continue to talk about moral and historical action? The form as much as the content of Pascal's wager was a paradigmatic response to that crisis of scepticism.

The common philosophical narrative is that philosophers sought to overcome this crisis by constructing theories of action that eliminated their dependence on a postulated 'final end' – that is, by making eschatology obsolete. But this is not the case. It is true of course, for example, that Kant's withdrawal of God as an object of speculative knowledge also undermines the reliability of putatively revealed knowledge about humanity's own or the world's final state. However, though Kant withdraws the eschaton as an object of speculative reason, his account of practical reason is wholly contingent on the projection of a final state, that is, is eschatological. The philosopher's claim here is not to have eliminated the dependence of ethics on eschatology, but to have eliminated the dependence of eschatology on revelation. Rather than a revealed doctrine, the

¹ My thanks to Thomas Pfau, Cyril O'Regan, Vassilios Paipais, and participants at 'Religion & Philosophy in Germany, 1918-1933' (Duke University, 2-3 November 2017) for their engagement with drafts of this paper; and to the University of St Andrews and the J. & A. Deas Fund for supporting its research. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

eschatological ‘final state’ has become a postulate – the assumed endpoint of a dynamic rational system.²

The crux of Kant’s eschatological ethics is that practical reason – the human faculty that guides (moral) action in conformity to universal moral norms – is not a merely nomological but also a teleological power. It is a guiding intuition of practical reason that not virtue alone, but ‘virtue and happiness together constitute the possession of the *summum bonum* [the highest good] in a person, and the distribution of happiness in exact proportion to morality (which is the worth of the person, and his worthiness to be happy) constitute the *summum bonum* of a possible world’.³ Because it is plain that this correlation of goodness and happiness is not achievable in the present life, Kant presents as postulates of practical reason, first, the immortality of the soul, and secondly, the existence of a benevolent and omnipotent God. Without these postulates to ensure the achievement of the *summum bonum* after death, practical reason would be fragmented, and could not be a reliable guide to action. This does not, of course, lay claim to God as a guarantor of rational laws; it merely points to the harmony of natural reason and the existence of God. Eschatology, here, is the articulation or reification of of a teleology inherent in rational human existence.

In his 1794 article ‘The End of All Things’, Kant specifically addresses the truth value of Christian eschatology. He frames the subject as a matter not of science or speculation but of practical reason: ‘The idea of an end of all things’, he writes, ‘takes its origin from reasoning not about the physical but rather about the moral course of things in the world’. The biblical images of final judgement are not themselves revealed grounds of eschatological belief, but merely ways of ‘making sensible’ the idea of an ultimate moral judgement and its consequences.⁴

Although speculative reason cannot conceptualize a state beyond space and time, Kant continues, practical reason must nevertheless project such a final state, because any duration of the world has value only insofar as ‘rational creatures are in it according to the final purpose [*Endzweck*] of their existence; if that final purpose is not achievable, then creation itself seems...without purpose, like a play without an end or discernible intention’.⁵ The moral order depends on its end.

² I have given a fuller account of philosophical eschatologies in the 19th century in Judith Wolfe, ‘Eschatology’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century Christian Thought*, ed. Joel Rasmussen, Judith Wolfe, and Johannes Zachhuber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), ch. 40.

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 77.

⁴ Immanuel Kant, ‘The End of All Things’, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 222.

⁵ Kant, 224.

We observe two things here. One, the legitimation of eschatological speculation has shifted vis-à-vis its pre-critical form: it is grounded no longer in the transcendent revelation of a sovereign divine plan, but in a transcendental analysis of the conditions of possibility of a rational system. Two, the eschatological *summum bonum* is associated with the attainment of freedom because Kant conceives of freedom as a nomological power, that is, a power that is free precisely in its free conformance to a universal law.⁶

These observations form the beginning of two large claims, which the remainder of this essay will begin to substantiate. One, the transposition of eschatology from a theological into a philosophical register – including from a revelation-based to a system-based form of legitimation – tacitly underlies much of 19th- and 20th-century European philosophy. Many of the great debates of early 20th-century philosophies of history and of politics, in particular, take the form of contestations about the meaning of eschatology.⁷ Two, the mutual contestations by philosophers of the meaning of eschatology are generally grounded in contrasting understandings of freedom. In philosophical systems that conceive freedom as a nomological or rational power (such as Kant's, Hegel's, and Cassirer's), eschatology legitimates, sustains or directs the entire system through the postulate of a final state of freedom, without which that system would be incoherent or powerless. By contrast, in philosophical theories that define freedom as an anti-nomological power, that is, as a sheerly indeterminate or creative force (such as Berdyaev's or, focusing not on human but on divine freedom, Barth's), eschatology functions as the marker of the necessary overturning or demolition of all systems.

Nomological Eschatologies: Kant and Hegel

Beside Kant's, the greatest nomological vision of freedom in modernity is Hegel's. Freedom, for Hegel, involves both will and intellect: it is achieved not in the free exercise of an undetermined potency, but in the consciousness of one's self-realization in accordance with 'the ideational content of always already existing reality'.⁸ At its human level, therefore, freedom manifests itself not in 'the restlessness of the idealistic young man, who seeks to transplant the divine kingdom of ideas into earthen soil', but rather in 'calm self-communion', 'intellectual maturity or content-rich

⁶ See e.g. Immanuel Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (Riga: Harknoch, 1785), 83–4.

⁷ The seminal account of philosophical and literary 'eschatologies' in modern Germany is, of course, Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele: Studien zu einer Lehre von letzten Haltungen.*, 3 vols (Einsiedeln: Pustet, 1937) His typology stands in a complex relationship to mine, which I intend to discuss at greater length in a forthcoming book on this subject. This as any engagement with Balthasar's *Apokalypse* will, of course, be indebted to Cyril O'Regan's work.

⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part 1: Science of Logic*, trans. Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), §23.

self-knowledge'.⁹ The opposite of such freedom is not bondage but dullness: a state primarily pertaining not to the will but to the intellect, namely that of 'spirit not or not yet knowing itself'.¹⁰

This human movement towards freedom participates in a larger movement of Spirit itself: all history is a 'progress in the consciousness of freedom'.¹¹ This freedom is closely associated with wholeness, because it means 'comprehending nothing less than the entire system of consciousness, or the entire realm of the truth of spirit'.¹² Because it depends on the notion of *wholeness*, the logic of this progress is not emergentist but eschatological. Unlike Rousseau's *perfectibilité* and Fichte's 'constant progression [that] never reaches an end',¹³ Hegel's understanding of freedom is comprehensible only from the perspective of the 'absolute End of history',¹⁴ at which it has achieved a 'final concord' of subject and object.¹⁵ In this paradoxical 'consummation of the infinite End' of knowledge and the world,¹⁶ Spirit will have 'fulfilled its eschatological design, the realization of its freedom and the attainment of its complete knowledge of itself'.¹⁷ Hegel's order of absolute Spirit depends on its end.

One of the rudimentary differences between Kant and Hegel's eschatologies is the relationship of spirit and nature in the attainment of freedom. To Kant, they remain antithetical: the natural realm is determined causally; the rational realm, nomologically. Freedom, consequently, is to a large extent freedom *from* nature, including not least the natural human drives. To Hegel, by contrast, spirit and nature strive towards integration: nature is the negative form of spirit, and absolute, that is, free Spirit is that which has reconciled within itself spirit and nature. For those who inherit their eschatologies, this has two important consequences. One, Hegel's eschatological trajectory is dialectical, Kant's linear. Two, Hegel's dialectical dynamic may be seen to imply a *necessary* system of progress, whereas Kant's dualist system delivers the *summum bonum* only to those who fight for the assertion of subjecthood over objectification by following the precepts of practical reason. This becomes a shibboleth for thinkers like Albrecht Ritschl and Ernst Troeltsch,

⁹ Hegel, §23.

¹⁰ Hegel, §23; see also Heinrich Scholz, *Die Bedeutung der Hegelschen Philosophie für das philosophische Denken der Gegenwart*, Philosophische Vorträge 26 (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1921), 17.

¹¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (London: George Bell & Sons, 1890), 107; cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942), §§354–360; G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), §482.

¹² G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), §89.

¹³ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E.S. Haldane (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, 1892), vol. 3, p. 492.

¹⁴ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, 163; Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. 1, 35.

¹⁵ Hegel, *Encyclopedia*, §24 addendum.

¹⁶ Hegel, §212 addendum; see also §242.

¹⁷ Daniel Berthold-Bond, 'Hegel's Eschatological Vision: Does History Have a Future?', *History and Theory* 27, no. 1 (1988): 15; see also Cyril O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), chap. 6.

who criticise Hegel's reduction of spirit to 'naturalism',¹⁸ or of history to the mere outworking of an a priori concept of absoluteness,¹⁹ but who do not relinquish a basically nomological conception of freedom, and therefore an understanding of eschatology as the fulfilment rather than the disruption of a system.

But more decisive than these differences for the philosophical eschatology of the interwar years is a shared *aporetic* dimension of Kant and Hegel's eschatologies: the simultaneous necessity and inconceivableness of the final state envisioned. For Kant, a state without change is a scandal to the imagination.²⁰ 'For a being which can become conscious of its existence and the magnitude of this existence (as duration) only in time, such a life – if it can even be called a life – appears equivalent to annihilation.'²¹ And yet at the same time, the *summum bonum* can be conceived only as a static end and not as an infinite progress, because no stage of that progress would warrant complete contentment.²² Kant concludes that we cannot evade positing a static end point, even though our imagination can perceive that end point only as an annihilation of life.

Similarly, Hegel's commitment to *wholeness* is in profound tension with his other commitment, namely to 'both knowledge and being as in their very essence dialectical and teleological processes of becoming',²³ whose vitality lies precisely in their dynamic of growth, and for which stasis would spell death. As Stanley Rosen notes, 'if we achieve the Hegelian science of totality, we must cease to become human'.²⁴ Many interpreters, including Karl Löwith,²⁵ Herbert Marcuse,²⁶ Gillian Rose²⁷ and Robert Solomon²⁸ try to avoid this problem by interpreting Hegel epochally, i.e. as positing no final end but only a non-finite dialectical succession of epochs.²⁹

As we shall see, this aporia of philosophical eschatology – that its eschatological end point is both the guarantee and the subversion of the system which is oriented towards it – becomes the

¹⁸ Johannes Zachhuber, *Theology as Science in Nineteenth-Century Germany: From F.C. Baur to Ernst Troeltsch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 179–80; see Albrecht Ritschl, *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung* (Bonn: Adolph Marcus, 1889), vol. 3, p. 211.

¹⁹ Ernst Troeltsch, 'Christentum und Religionsgeschichte', in *Zur religiösen Lage, Religionsphilosophie und Ethik*, Ernst Troeltsch Kritische Gesamtausgabe 10 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1913), 333; see also Reinhold Bernhardt, *Der Absolutheitsanspruch des Christentums: Von der Aufklärung bis zur pluralistischen Religionstheologie* (Gütersloh: G. Mohn, 1990), 98–99.

²⁰ Kant, 'The End of All Things', 227.

²¹ Kant, 227.

²² Kant, 228.

²³ Berthold-Bond, 'Hegel's Eschatological Vision', 16.

²⁴ Stanley Rosen, *Hegel: An Introduction to the Science of Wisdom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 279; Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. J.H. Nichols (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 158–60, n.6.

²⁵ Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 38–39.

²⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *Reason And Revolution* (London: Routledge And Kegan Paul, 1955), 224–5.

²⁷ Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (London: Athlone, 1981).

²⁸ Robert C. Solomon, *In the Spirit of Hegel: A Study of G.W.F. Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 14ff.

²⁹ As suggested e.g. in G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, trans. Peter Hodgson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), §343.

motor of some of the most sophisticated philosophical eschatologies of the 20th century, including Heidegger's, Benjamin's, and later Derrida's.

Historicist Eschatology: Ernst Troeltsch

A terminological difficulty besets English-language discussions of German philosophies of history in the late 19th and early 20th centuries: the translation as 'historicism' of two antithetical German concepts, *Historizismus* and *Historismus*. 'Historicism' in the first sense is a common description of Hegel's grand theory of history.³⁰ 'Historicism' in the second sense, by contrast, is the name of the philosophy of history emerging in the late 19th and early 20th century as a repudiation of Hegelian and other strongly teleological accounts of historical development. Led by Wilhelm Dilthey, Wilhelm Windelband, Heinrich Rickert and others, historicists (in this second sense) stressed the unique contexts, pressures and actors of each historical era, which made overarching theories of development or progress impossible, and closed history as a textbook for the study of universal truths or values. It is historicism in the second sense with which this section is concerned.

In theology, the early-20th-century History of Religions School adopted a historicist approach to Christianity and other religions, paying attention to the particular circumstances and (mutual) influences of their historical developments. While Hegelian appropriations of Christianity centred on an apocalyptic trajectory culminating in an immanentized eschaton, eschatology within historicist approaches became, rather, a mark of the primitive apocalyptic mindset that irretrievably *separated* early Christianity from enlightened Christendom, and proved the historicist thesis that even religions must be seen within their particular historical contexts. For Franz Overbeck, Johann Weiss, and Albert Schweitzer, Jesus preached an imminent end of history which did not in fact arrive; later Christianity was (for better or worse) the construction of a secular system of power, thought, and ethics on the ruins of a disappointed eschatological expectation.

Historicism was, in this sense, anti-eschatological: it denied the possibility of discerning an overarching direction and end point of moral or historical existence. The force of this critique was felt by dominant theological systems like Albrecht Ritschl's immanent eschatology of the ethical Kingdom of God, built on both Kant and Hegel, which Ritschl's own students Julius Kaftan, Wilhelm Herrmann, and Adolf von Harnack criticized for its reliance on a teleological conception of history rendered untenable by contemporary historicism, and sought to revise in an individualist direction.³¹

³⁰ Vassilios Paipais has done interesting work on eschatological critiques (relying on readings of Pauline eschatology) of historicism by post-Marxists such as Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, and Giorgio Agamben. See Paipais, "‘Already/Not Yet’: St Paul's Eschatology and the Modern Critique of Historicism", forthcoming in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*.

³¹ See Zachhuber, *Theology as Science in Nineteenth-Century Germany*, 284.

But the historicist deconstruction of eschatology was fiercely contested in Weimar theology and philosophy, both by those who affirmed historicist principles and by those who rejected them. A pivotal figure in this debate was theologian and philosopher of history Ernst Troeltsch, another student of Ritschl, who played a defining role in the theorization of historicism around World War I. Unlike Kaftan, Herrmann and Harnack, Troeltsch argued that Ritschl's vision of a Kingdom of God – a kingdom in which ultimate values could be realized – should not be withdrawn to a realm immune from the flux of history (namely the individual), but sought within that history in all its contingency and vicissitudes.³² 'History is to be overcome through history.'³³

Troeltsch is committed to the historicist claim that history is shaped by the pursuits and conflicts of individual wills, not by an underlying law, structure or direction. It is therefore illegitimate to postulate an ultimate purpose of history *a priori*. Ultimate purpose or value is always that of historical actors, and must consequently be discovered hermeneutically:

Beginning from historically individual acts of value formation, we use a posteriori induction to gain an overview of the values realized in history so far. From the trajectories of the highest realizations, we can then conclude to the normative, fundamental values that precede all history and motivate its course as ends (not causes). Finally, in a normative turn, we can adduce these inductively gained values as norms or criteria for the deductive assessment of particular acts of value formation. The more strongly the latter represent the normative principles, the more validity they have.³⁴

The essence of Christianity, for Troeltsch, is the discernment and pursuit of such normative values: Christianity is, in this sense, nothing more or less than eschatology. This is precisely the argument of Troeltsch's article on eschatology in the 1910 edition of the monumental encyclopaedia *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*. Religion, he argues, is perpetually distinct from science, including historical science, in its free and radical orientation towards the 'last things' in the sense of ultimate truths and values.³⁵ Everything else that characterizes the religious eschatological imagination – apocalyptic cataclysm, judgement, heaven and hell – is mythological embellishment of this basic orientation. These normative values cannot be conceived as realizable in this life, because they stand at the end of a nearly infinite chain of immanent or secular relations and dependencies that need to be thought through, enunciated, or lived out before these last things can come into view. They function, rather, as 'ever projected goals and ideals, which are partly realized in all forms of life, but fully realized in none, but only present as...final purposes'.³⁶

³² See Zachhuber, 284.

³³ Ernst Troeltsch, *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1912), 85.

³⁴ Bernhardt, *Der Absolutheitsanspruch des Christentums*, 98–99.

³⁵ Ernst Troeltsch, 'Eschatologie: dogmatisch', *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1910).

³⁶ Troeltsch, *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte*, 76.

Ultimate values can only be hermeneutically inferred as the implied end points of human actions and pursuits, on which these actions depend, but which they never fully instantiate in this life.

Troeltsch is here revising Schleiermacher in an eschatological direction: His is a feeling of absolute dependence experienced *through time*: an absolute dependence on religious intuition for the *direction of an individual's life*, not for his or her immediate position.³⁷ This eschatologization also renders Schleiermacher's largely passive religious feeling radically active: individuals have to grasp and pursue the values on which their life's direction depends actively and wilfully.

For Troeltsch, in other words, eschatology is essentially an idealism of freedom: It is the attainment of the absolute which we achieve or perceive through a freely willed dedication to that which is above the merely impulsive and relative. The end of this eschatological breakthrough to the absolute must be projected to beyond death, when the individual soul achieves union with God.

Here Troeltsch encounters an aporia not dissimilar to Kant's and Hegel's. For the moment of highest blessedness is also the dissolution of the individual:

Highest, perfect beatitude would be the final moment, and it would kill this finite being by lifting it beyond itself and thus annihilating it. Only of perfected beatitude would the finite being die, and in that beatitude would its individual differences dissolve after they had realized their wealth of life and blessedness *by creatively positing their own personality*, and creatively giving form to the divine ground of their lives.³⁸

Troeltsch's strong emphasis on will and action means that the last end of the human life – dissolution in the divine – is not a coherent fulfilment but a nihilation of the *will-determined* eschatological self. As for Kant and Hegel, the eschatological end upholds but also undermines Troeltsch's system.

Existential Eschatologies: Franz Rosenzweig and the Dialectical Theologians

By the early 1920's, Troeltsch's attitude to historicism (*Historismus*), which had always been cautious, turned wholly critical: to him, it was the chief factor in precipitating the great cultural crisis of the time by relativizing all values and denying all shape to history.³⁹ This language of crisis pervaded the contemporaneous publishing scene.⁴⁰ Neo-Kantian philosopher Arthur Liebert, in his 1924 *Die geistige Krisis der Gegenwart* (*The spiritual crisis of the present*), declared it philosophy's task

³⁷ The most explicit invocation of Schleiermacher is seen in Troeltsch, 'Eschatologie: dogmatisch', col. 626.

³⁸ Troeltsch, col. 630 (emphasis added).

³⁹ Ernst Troeltsch, 'Die Krisis des Historismus', *Die neue Rundschau* 33, no. 1 (1922): 572–90; Ernst Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1922).

⁴⁰ See e.g. Rudolf Pannwitz, *Die Krisis der Europäischen Kultur* (Nuremberg: Hans Carl, 1917); Paul Ernst, *Der Zusammenbruch des deutschen Idealismus* (Munich: Georg Müller, 1918); Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, 2 vols (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1918-1922); Arthur Liebert, *Die geistige Krisis der Gegenwart* (Berlin: Pan-Verlag, 1924).

not to substantiate or present any of the arbitrary crises of contemporary life, no matter how staggering a force it may possess. Rather, it is to expose the crisis of our time and of the whole contemporary worldview and temper of life, viz., the concept and meaning of all the individual crises and the common intellectual and metaphysical source by which they are conditioned and from which they are nourished.

Like Troeltsch, Liebert located this consummate crisis of all crises in ‘the fatal historical scepticism and relativism nourished by historicism.’⁴¹

Philosophers and theologians inheriting existentialist concerns fiercely contested Troeltsch’s diagnosis and solution: not because it was overly eschatological but because it was falsely or insufficiently so. For Rosenzweig and the dialectical theologians, though in different ways, the key to gaining a clear view of eschatology – and with it of the world as a whole – was to grasp the nettle of finitude.

In the 1922 edition of *The Epistle to the Romans*, Karl Barth made his provocative announcement that ‘[a] Christianity that is not wholly and utterly and irreducibly eschatology has absolutely nothing to do with Christ. ... Can we wish to be anything other and better than men of hope, or anything additional?’ – anything other, that is, than wholly and utterly directed toward redemption, to the ‘impossible, which confronts us as hope?’⁴² While the first part of that programme sounds just like Troeltsch’s similar announcement in 1910, the second part rebuffs any attempt to integrate this eschatological orientation with a participation in historical value-sifting.

The ingenious turn of Barth, Tillich, and their collaborators in the evocatively titled journal *Zwischen den Zeiten* (*Between the times*), was to cast the crisis of historicism as a site of eschatological significance by reinterpreting ‘crisis’ in double-edged fashion. On the one hand, diagnostically: for Tillich and Barth, as for Troeltsch, the contemporary crisis of life and thought was a symptom of a catastrophic loss of faith. On the other, theologically: for Barth, Gogarten and Bultmann, the concept of ‘crisis’ itself denoted an eschatological event, namely the inbreaking of the divine *as* the absolute crisis of the worldly. This inbreaking occurs in a Kierkegaardian ‘moment’ or ‘øyeblik’, a term deliberately referencing the eschatological prophecy of 1 Cor 15.52. For Troeltsch, who is

⁴¹ Liebert, *Die geistige Krisis der Gegenwart*, 7–9; quoted in Charles Bambach, ‘Weimar Philosophy and the Crisis of Historical Thinking’, in *Weimar Thought: A Contested Legacy*, ed. John P. McCormick and Peter Gordon (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 134.

⁴² Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1922); Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II.1: The Doctrine of God*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 634–635.

fiercely critical of it, the theology of Gogarten and his colleagues is a ‘theology of the absolute moment’.⁴³

In this theological fight-back, the historicist claim of a meaningless flux of history remained intact, but was itself relativized by reference to an existential eschatology that defined the significance of the individual life. This eschatological inbreaking was initiated entirely by free acts of God, emancipated from the causal chain of historical time:

According to Tillich, history is constituted thus: an event within space and time can be regarded as developing out of what has previously happened and continuing it. An event of this type, however, remains within the finite, closed circle of being. It is only when this spell is broken that something really ‘new’ happens and ‘meaning’ appears within space and time. This is the eschatological *kairos*.⁴⁴

As it was for Schweitzer negatively, so it was for the dialectical theologians positively impossible to relate the concept of eschatology constructively to that of history; ‘theologically, we can assert only the strict impossibility of mediating between eschatology and history’.⁴⁵

History, then, in its determination by causal chains and the play and jostle of human wills, is of ‘infinite qualitative difference’ from the eternal will of God, which can therefore manifest itself only as its crisis, not as its redemption. The eschatological inbreaking of God effects the redemption of the individual from time, rather than the redemption of time. Bultmann will later state provocatively that with the cross, the definitive crisis of all reality, ‘History has reached its end’. The church ‘is the community of the end-time, an eschatological phenomenon. How could it have a history now when the world-time is finished and the end is imminent! The consciousness of being the eschatological community is at the same time the consciousness of being taken out of the still existing world.’⁴⁶

Although this is a distinctively theological construct, it also fits a recognizable pattern sketched in the introduction of this essay, namely that philosophical contestations of the meaning of ‘eschatology’ are often grounded in opposing understandings of freedom. Where freedom is understood as a nomological or rational power, as it is for Kant, Hegel and Troeltsch, eschatology legitimates and directs the system as a whole through the projection of a final state of freedom. By contrast, where freedom is understood as an anti-nomological power, that is, as an indeterminate or sheerly creative force, eschatology functions as the marker of the necessary overturning or

⁴³ Troeltsch, ‘Ein Apfel vom Baume Kierkegaards (1921)’; quoted in Georg Essen, *Geschichtstheologie und Eschatologie in der Moderne: Eine Grundlegung* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2011), 34.

⁴⁴ Gerhard Sauter, ‘Protestant Theology’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry L. Walls (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 256; see also Alf Christophersen, *Kairos: Protestantische Zeitdeutungskämpfe in der Weimarer Republik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 41–47.

⁴⁵ Essen, *Geschichtstheologie und Eschatologie in der Moderne*, 34.

⁴⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1957), 43.

demolition of all systems. For the dialectical theologians, this freedom is not human but divine freedom; nevertheless, it characteristically manifests itself as the crisis of the system of history.⁴⁷

The Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig concurred in Barth's emphasis on human finitude as a key to understanding eschatology, but drew the line of finitude wider than Barth had done, to include divine action as well. In 1912, Rosenzweig offered as his doctoral dissertation a positive appraisal of Hegel's doctrine of the state. But by the time the dissertation was published in 1920, he had lost his confidence in history as bringing to reality a latent ideal.⁴⁸ Contrary to Troeltsch, Rosenzweig found the cause of the crisis of Weimar not in historicism's denial of universal values, but in the identification of nationalist aspirations with spiritual ideals. The war, he contended, had exposed nationalism as a destructive force, and idealism as its enabling illusion. What Troeltsch had labelled 'eschatology' – a belief in the human person as *capax infinitatis* by reason and free will – Rosenzweig regarded as an escape into a false, spatialized eternity.

For Rosenzweig, an epitome of this form of false eschatology was the idealism championed by neo-Kantian Ernst Cassirer in his epoch-defining 1929 Disputation at Davos with Martin Heidegger (to whom we will return).⁴⁹ Cassirer found his vision of human capacity for the infinite eloquently pictured in Schiller's poem 'Ideal and Life':

The body alone is enthralled to the powers
That weave dark fate,
But *Form* is free from all force of time:
The playmate of blessed natures
Walking in meadows of light above,
Divine among divinities.
If you would soar high on the wings of Form,
Throw off the fear of the earthly.
Flee from this narrow and dull life
Into the realm of the ideal!

Rosenzweig's 'new thinking' intended to overcome this fantasy through a more honest attention to eschatology. The famous opening lines of his *Star of Redemption* (1921) are an explicit repudiation of Schiller's exhortation to 'throw off the fear of the earthly'; instead, they call the fear

⁴⁷ A particularly interesting 'eschatological metaphysics' of voluntarist rupture, beyond the German purview of this essay, is Nicholas Berdyaev's. See also Carnegie Samuel Calian, *The Significance of Eschatology in the Thoughts of Nicolas Berdyaev* (Leiden: Brill, 1965).

⁴⁸ See Franz Rosenzweig, *Hegel und der Staat*, 2 vols (Munich: R. Oldenburg, 1920); Peter Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 83.

⁴⁹ Martin Heidegger and Ernst Cassirer, 'Davoser Disputation zwischen Ernst Cassirer und Martin Heidegger', in *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm Von Herrmann, 2nd ed., GA 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2010), 274–96.

of death the fount of all wisdom.⁵⁰ Rosenzweig could here be drawing on Franz Overbeck, who wrote forty years earlier: ‘eschatology teaches us exactly what death teaches us, no more and no less’.⁵¹

It is notable that in this philosophical climate, the neutralization of the impact of death by the construction of a vista of eternity was not, or no longer, seen as the temptation of religion but as that of Idealism. Drawing on Hermann Cohen’s contested last work, *Rational Religion out of the Sources of Judaism* (1919), Rosenzweig rather juxtaposes religion with ethics as that which concerns the individual and particular rather than the communal and universal. Primordial religious experience, in this conception, is not oriented towards eternal or universal values, but towards the individual experience of death.

[I]t is not surprising that *The Star of Redemption* regards the sheer fact of mortality as Hegel’s defeat. For Rosenzweig, the nonrelational and non-transferable experience of possible death would become the conceptual instrument for exposing the falsity of idealist totalization. Rosenzweig thus refused to follow Hegel’s idea that the death of the particular should be considered a moment of tragedy in an unfolding narrative of redemption.⁵²

Rosenzweig’s radically immanent eschatology reimagines the possibility of the experience of divine action in the world. Karl Löwith contrasts Rosenzweig’s eschatology with Heidegger’s at this point, ascribing to Rosenzweig a belief in and to Heidegger a denial of eternity; but as Peter Gordon has demonstrated, Rosenzweig’s ‘eternity’ is much more ambiguous than Löwith makes out.⁵³

Political Eschatologies

Not everyone relinquished the Hegelian ambition for a large-scale interpretation of world history. An illustrative liminal case is that of Oswald Spengler, whose apocalyptically titled *Untergang des Abendlandes* (usually translated *The Decline of the West*, but more faithfully rendered the ‘twilight’ or ‘downfall’ of the occident) was the most influential popular-level historiography in Weimar. Spengler was a historicist in rejecting a progressive development of world history; but he nevertheless offered a master narrative of its structure, a quasi-biological cycle of the rise, senescence and decay of civilizations.

Spengler’s system holds no space for the achievement of an eschatological state of freedom or beatitude. Rather, it is the framing message of *The Decline of the West* that liberty and joy lie in

⁵⁰ Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung*, ed. Albert Raffelt (Freiburg: Universitätsbibliothek, 2002), 4; see the discussion in Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger*, 144–9.

⁵¹ From the unpublished ‘Kirchenlexikon’ (a collection of several thousand index cards), on a series of cards entitled ‘Christentum Eschatologie Allg.’, 2-3; quoted in Rudolf Wehrli, *Alter und Tod des Christentums bei Franz Overbeck* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1977), 297–8.

⁵² Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger*, 113.

⁵³ Karl Löwith, ‘M. Heidegger and F. Rosenzweig, Or, Temporality and Eternity’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 3, no. 1 (1942): 53–77; see also his seminal Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

conscious submission to the endless cycle of historical repetition. The first volume opens with Goethe's poem 'Wenn im Unendlichen dasselbe': 'When in the infinite the same / repeats itself in eternal flux', then 'zest for life streams from all things', and 'all urgency, all striving / is eternal rest in God the Lord.'⁵⁴ The second volume closes with the exhortation that human freedom is found not in 'achieving this or that', but in 'doing what is necessary': 'Fate leads the willing and drags the unwilling.'⁵⁵ If Faustian (that is, Western) man is unique within the endless cycle of fate, it is (contra Berdyaev) for having achieved sufficient distance from himself and his own epoch to recognize them as objects within it, and thus to have *become* capable of writing their history.⁵⁶

The philosophical eschatology of Walter Benjamin is a distinctively Jewish contestation of this master narrative. At least in the early 1930's, Benjamin largely accepts Spengler's cyclical view of history, but revalues it by placing the entire system under the pressure of Messianic absence. Endless repetition, for the Jewish thinker, is an expression not of zest for life, but of despair in the face of history's estrangement from Messiah. Benjamin achieves the characteristic tension of his vision by accepting the historicist premise of an absolute discontinuity between 'profane' history and the religious promise of a Messiah, without thereby surrendering the latter. Rather, he concludes in his early 'Theological-Political Fragment':

Only the Messiah himself completes all historical occurrences, namely in the sense that he first redeems, fulfils, and creates the relation of the latter to the Messianic. This is why nothing historical can attempt to relate itself to the Messianic. This is why the kingdom of God is not the *telos* of the historical *dynamis*; it cannot be posited as the latter's goal. From the perspective of history, it is not goal but end.⁵⁷

This is a distinctively Jewish vision, in which the 'transcendent' element of a Messiah has been separated from the expectation of quasi-apocalyptic cataclysm. Because only the Messiah, who cannot be anticipated from within history, could redeem history, history is forced to undergo apocalypse after apocalypse without thereby being ended.

I hardly feel the need to make sense of the state of the world in general. A great many cultures have already perished in blood and horror on this planet. Of course one must wish that it will one day experience one that has left both behind – indeed, I am inclined to assume that it waits for one

⁵⁴ Spengler, *Untergang des Abendlandes*, vol. 1, v.

⁵⁵ Spengler, *Untergang des Abendlandes*, vol. 2, 630.

⁵⁶ Spengler, *Untergang des Abendlandes*, vol. 1, 135.

⁵⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'Theologisch-politisches Fragment', in *Illuminationen*, ed. Siegfried Unseld (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977).

such. But whether *we* are capable of laying such a gift on its three hundred- or four hundred-millionth birthday table is, alas, very questionable.⁵⁸

Karl Kraus, like so many Jewish writers and artists after him, is another German-speaking Jew who turns the Jewish messianic sensibility towards the apocalyptic rather than the redemptive. Kraus's satirical play about World War I, *The Last Days of Mankind*, closes on an apocalyptic scenario. Over a grotesque battlefield, on which the 'lord of hyenas' has led his pack in a waltz among the corpses, the apocalypse descends: A meteor shower is followed by flames, 'world thunder', and finally 'doom'. The last words are the voice of God: 'I did not want this'.⁵⁹ This chillingly ambiguous statement, ironically echoing Kaiser Wilhelm, is equally an apology to the world and a repudiation of it – God is unwilling to take the world home, and it is doomed to go on by itself.

But Spengler was not the only political thinker who rejected the supposed impossibility of a historicist (here in the sense of *historizistisch*, not *historistisch*) master narrative. Thinkers across a considerable spectrum saw the crisis of World War I and its aftermath not as defeaters but as confirmation of a quasi-Hegelian eschatology. On the political left, Marxism offered a commanding eschatological narrative – a dimension of Marxist thought that others have treated at length.⁶⁰ On the political right, Hegelian ideas of crisis combined with familiar strategies of revaluing apocalyptic disappointment to produce new national hopes.⁶¹

The extent to which, in the first years of the Great War, German philosophers participated in an eschatological triumphalism is well established.⁶² Publishers in Berlin, Gotha, Jena, and Stuttgart issued war booklets by philosophers including Rudolf Eucken, Friedrich Gogarten, Adolf Lasson, and Heinrich Scholz. They commonly identified the German military force as an embodiment of its national spirit, and that national spirit in turn as the agent of eschatological

⁵⁸ Letter to Werner Kraft, 28 October 1935, in Walter Benjamin, *Briefe*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor Adorno (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966), vols 2, 193; cf. the famous 'Angelus Novus' passage in Walter Benjamin, *Kairos: Schriften zur Philosophie*, ed. R. Konersmann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2007), 317. For an account of the shift towards 'weak messianic power' in Benjamin's thought after the period under consideration here, see Agata Bielik-Robson, *Jewish Cryptotheologies of Late Modernity: Philosophical Marranos* (London: Routledge, 2017).

⁵⁹ Karl Kraus, *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit*, ed. E. Früh (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992), 280.

⁶⁰ Early treatments include the now classic Löwith, *Meaning in History*, and Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Origins of Russian Communism*, trans. R.M. French (London: G. Bles, 1937). The most ambitious recent treatment is Roland Boer, *The Criticism of Heaven and Earth*, 5 vols (Leiden: Brill, 2007). A brief overview of his argument is given in Roland Boer, 'Marxism and Eschatology Reconsidered', *Meditations: Journal of the Marxist Literary Group* 25, no. 1 (2010): 39–59.

⁶¹ A distinctive conservative appropriation of eschatological language for political philosophy was Carl Schmitt's vision of the regime as the *katechon*, the undefined figure of 2 Thessalonians 2.6-7 who (or which) restrains the Antichrist. See Carl Schmitt, *Glossarium: Aufzeichnungen der Jahre 1947-1951*, ed. Eberhard Freiherr von Medem (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1991), 63; see also Wolfgang Palaver, 'Carl Schmitt's "Apocalyptic" Resistance against Global Civil War', in *Politics and Apocalypse*, ed. Robert Hamerton-Kelly (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2007), 69–94.

⁶² See especially Klaus Vondung, *The Apocalypse in Germany* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000).

freedom: ‘Our army and navy too are a spiritual power’ (Lasson⁶³); ‘To our highest thoughts, the German people and the German spirit are the revelation of eternity’ (Gogarten⁶⁴); a German defeat would ‘rob world history of its deepest meaning’ and ‘signify the downfall of human history’ (Eucken⁶⁵). Even Franz Rosenzweig, who wrote his dissertation on Hegel’s philosophy of states, at that time (still under the influence of Herman Cohen’s assimilationist project) shared the expectation that the war would ‘serve as a theatre for the triumph of German ideals’.⁶⁶ The attitude was so common as to furnish the satirical epilogue of *The Last Days of Mankind*, in which engineer ‘Dr Sunset from Berlin’ appears as a self-declared ‘knight of the Spirit’, who concocts lethal gas in order ‘finally to achieve the final final victory, so as finally infinitely to triumph’.⁶⁷

Even the horrors of the war did not initially confound this optimism. After all, Hegel had predicted a phase of radical negativity as the necessary ‘birth pangs’⁶⁸ of the final phase of the self-realization of absolute Spirit, that is, the Germanic empire.⁶⁹ But the colossal disappointment of Weimar dispersed these eschatological hopes and fomented the crisis of historicism to which conceptual removals of eschatology from world history formed such an urgent response.

It was primarily those who were to become the intellectual leaders of the National Socialist movement who, in a textbook case of apocalyptic prediction revision, re-cast Weimar not as a failure of the expected Messianic kingdom but merely as its delay. Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, author of the programmatic *Dritte Reich* (1923), chose ‘the Third Reich’ as an epithet for the Germany of the future not only in succession to the two preceding ‘German’ empires, but above all by reference to Joachim of Fiore’s apocalyptic ‘third empire’ of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁰ The condition from which this Reich would be born, he warned, was one of pain and mourning, a condition symbolized by the ‘sable flag of need, humiliation and utter bitterness’.⁷¹ Hitler and Goebbels later concretized this image in ritual celebrations of the (failed) Beer Hall Putsch of November 1923, at which the ‘banner of blood’ carried at the putsch was displayed to the public as a sign of the

⁶³ Adolf Lasson, *Deutsche Art und deutsche Bildung* (Berlin: Carl Heymann, 1914), n.p.

⁶⁴ Friedrich Gogarten, *Religion und Volkstum* (Jena: Diederichs, 1915), col. 55; cited in Klaus Vondung, *Die Apokalypse in Deutschland* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988), 191.

⁶⁵ Rudolf Eucken, *Die weltgeschichtliche Bedeutung des deutschen Geistes* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1914), 22.

⁶⁶ Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger*, 82.

⁶⁷ ‘Um endlich den endlichen Endsieg zu kriegen, und dann also endlich unendlich zu siegen’; Kraus, *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit*, 278.

⁶⁸ See the accounts of the onset of the eschatological kingdom in Matthew 24.8, Romans 8.22, and the Book of Revelation.

⁶⁹ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §358.

⁷⁰ Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, *Germany’s Third Empire*, trans. E.O. Lorimer (London: Allen & Unwin, 1934), 12–3; On Nazism’s appropriation of apocalyptic language more generally, see e.g. Ekkehard Bärsch, *Die politische Religion des Nationalsozialismus*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Fink, 2002), B.I.1-3; Klaus Vondung, ‘National Socialism as a Political Religion: Potentials and Limits of an Analytical Concept’, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 6, no. 1 (2005): 87–95; Judith Wolfe, ‘Messianism’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology and Modern European Thought*, ed. Nicholas Adams, George Pattison, and Graham Ward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 301–24; pp. 310-5.

⁷¹ Moeller van den Bruck, *Germany’s Third Empire*, 242–3.

messianic woes endured for the coming kingdom.⁷² Hitler encouraged the apocalyptic terminology of a ‘Third Reich’ until 1938, when he discarded it for more pragmatic language.⁷³

This eschatological vision was initially ambiguous as to its philosophical underpinnings, and was interpreted by many philosophers as a straightforward return to the eschatological nationalism of Fichte and Hegel: a nationalism of spirit rather than (as in the emerging mainstream of Nazi ideology) of blood. When the German Philosophical Society pledged its allegiance to Hitler in 1933, it was with such a vision in mind.⁷⁴ At its October meeting, to which Hitler sent greetings, Bruno Bauch spoke of National Socialism as the beginning of a ‘wonderful national revival’ of the Fichtean dream, destined to ‘radically overcome the malign spirit of pragmatism and materialism’ – a vision, he added, which German philosophy would support as a ‘sacred duty and task’.⁷⁵ Bauch went on to deliver guest lectures on ‘the people as a structure of nature and meaning’ (*Das Volk als Natur- und Sinngebilde*) and ‘Fichte and the political task of reconstruction of our time’ across Germany.⁷⁶ This superimposition of a spiritual conception of Germany on the blood-and-soil nationalism of the political leadership was one of the chief ways in which philosophers came to support the Nazi regime; it later appeared as if they were, as Hannah Arendt reported of Heidegger to Günther Gaus, ‘caught in the trap of [their] own ideas’.⁷⁷

Heideggerian Eschatologies

Perhaps the most remarkable philosophical eschatology in interwar Germany was that of Martin Heidegger, which acted as a crucible for the concerns and contestations explored in this essay. Heidegger’s developing eschatology – shifting from an individualistic focus on being-unto-death in the 1920’s to a national hope for a ‘last god’ in the 1930’s – was, for all its problems, more attuned than perhaps any other to the aporia of Kant’s and Hegel’s systems as well as the insufficiencies of their various inversions. He responded to the crisis of philosophy and history in the post-war period, or tried to name that crisis, not by resolving but by grasping the tension between trajectory and end: the world, he concluded, simply was one in which things were or appeared oriented towards an end, but could not reach or find fulfilment in that end. Heidegger’s

⁷² Vondung, ‘National Socialism as a Political Religion: Potentials and Limits of an Analytical Concept’, 88–92.

⁷³ For a fuller account, see Wolfe, ‘Messianism’.

⁷⁴ See *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Philosophischen Gesellschaft* 10 (April 1933), 1. See also George Leaman, ‘Reflections on German Philosophy and National Socialism: What happened and why it matters to philosophy’, in *Philosophie und Zeitgeist im Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Marion Heinz and Goran Gretic (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2006), 233–50.

⁷⁵ Published as Bruno Bauch, ‘Wert und Zweck’, *Blätter für deutsche Philosophie* 8 (1934): 39–59.

⁷⁶ See Sven Slotter, ‘Die Tyrannei der Werte: Philosophie und Politik bei Bruno Bauch’, in *Angst vor der Moderne: Philosophische Antworten auf Krisenerfahrungen*, ed. Klaus-M. Kodalle (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2000), 89–103, 89–103; p. 98.

⁷⁷ Television interview given on 28 October 1964 on Gaus’s programme *Zur Person* (ZDF).

philosophy, consequently, took the shape of an ethical inflection of the Kantian problem of metaphysics, which centred on a morally charged description of ‘the human’ as most vitally defined by the tension between ineluctable finitude and the equally persistent desire to transcend it. The aim of both speculative and moral philosophy was here no longer to aspire to a transcendent ideal, but to sustain an ‘authentic’ human existence by refusing to collapse this constitutive tension into either a metaphysical meta-narrative or an (apathetic or ‘sceptical’) denial of its allure. It is this peculiar pathos that came to define a basic stance of 20th-century European philosophy.

I have given a full account elsewhere of Heidegger’s early development of an ‘eschatology without eschaton’.⁷⁸ Here, I wish merely to highlight some aspects of the relation of this developing eschatology to other positions sketched in this article, and to extend the developmental account to the end of the interwar period, drawing on Heidegger’s recently published *Black Notebooks*.

Martin Heidegger’s being-unto-death is profitably read as a radical philosophical response to the tension between trajectories and ends within 19th-century philosophical eschatology. Humans, Heidegger argues, are never fully defined or realized in the present moment, but depend for their identity on a future that they can neither foresee nor control. One of the philosopher’s guiding questions is whether and how it is possible to live authentically within these conditions.

For Heidegger, authenticity in its full sense is closely related to completeness: it consists, ideally, in the realization of a certain ‘wholeness’ of personhood that has been proleptically apprehended and pursued. But such ‘authenticity’, he also realizes, is structurally impossible within the conditions of ordinary human life as he has described them, because it is not even tendentially possible to achieve the required wholeness. The defining fact of this challenge, for Heidegger, is death. To know or be oneself fully, one would have to be able to survey the whole of oneself. But there is no such ‘whole’, not only because there are always unrealized possibilities, but also because the ultimate and inavertible possibility of human existence is death. If death marks the completion of one’s life, and thus the point at which one might at last gain a full view of it, it also marks one’s own cessation: at the very point when we might achieve wholeness, we no longer exist. For Heidegger, this leads to the realization that a realistically authentic life must, in an irreducible paradox, consist precisely in accepting the impossibility of wholeness and with it of authenticity in its full sense: human life, within the conditions that obtain, is most truly lived in conscious orientation towards one’s own death – an attitude that Heidegger labels, after Luther and Kierkegaard, ‘being unto death’.

⁷⁸ Judith Wolfe, *Heidegger’s Eschatology: Theological Horizons in Martin Heidegger’s Early Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Like that of the dialectical theologians, this is a broadly ‘existential’ eschatology, developed in dialogue with similar sources, especially Paul, Augustine, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Overbeck. However, just as he engages the aporia of 19th-century philosophical eschatology more radically, so Heidegger confronts historicism more radically than Barth. (It is perhaps, among other things, for this reason that he regarded Barth as a philosophical lightweight.⁷⁹) For Heidegger, the real significance of historicist insights is not that the philosopher of history can survey and categorize the vicissitudes of history from his armchair, but that he, too, is existentially historical or temporal, unable to secure his existence in a foothold outside the flux of history (including a vertical ‘eschatological’ relationship to the divine). Eschatology, for Heidegger in the late 1910’s and early 1920’s, becomes a way of acknowledging that inescapable historicity: in Paul’s exhortation to the Thessalonians, and in Augustine’s *cor inquietum*, he finds an authentic attitude to our own existence always oriented towards a future we cannot foresee or control.⁸⁰

In 1930, Bultmann levered what he called Gogarten’s concept of ‘being-towards-the-other’ against a profound flaw he perceived in Heidegger’s eschatology without eschaton: its inability to accommodate the genuinely *new* which is such an important part of traditional eschatology.⁸¹ (A similar argument was later levelled by Moltmann against Bloch.⁸²) Heidegger himself, though he would not accept Bultmann’s theological critique, seems himself to have felt the weakness, as his resigned 1929/30 account of boredom as a basic and ultimately inescapable human mood attests.⁸³ At the same time, his thoughts, like those of many of his contemporaries, were increasingly turning from the possibility of individual authenticity to that of the larger community.

This dimension of Heidegger’s thought and actions of the 1930’s has been significantly illuminated by the publication of the Black Notebooks, Heidegger’s intellectual diaries of the period. In 1931, Heidegger opened his notebooks with the repeated complaint that *Being and Time* was not being received as intended: rather than bring genuine change, it was unthinkingly assimilated into the production line of ‘polytechnic’ university research (see e.g. III.203). How, he asked again and again in these early pages, could his project – which should elicit a consciously lived life, not more idle talk – be actualized? Heidegger’s ambition was now (whether or not it had been in 1927) for a corporate rather than a merely individual renewal. To understand his book

⁷⁹ Heidegger to Bultmann, 29 March 1927, in Andreas Großmann and Christof Landmesser, eds., *Rudolf Bultmann / Martin Heidegger: Briefwechsel 1925–1975* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2009), 25.

⁸⁰ See Martin Heidegger, *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*, ed. Matthias Jung, Thomas Regehly, and Claudius Strube, GA 60 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1995).

⁸¹ Rudolf Bultmann, ‘Die Geschichtlichkeit des Daseins und der Glaube: Antwort an Gerhard Kuhlmann’, *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 11 (1930): 258–9; see the account in Judith Wolfe, *Heidegger and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2014), chap. 8.

⁸² See M. Douglas Meeks, *Origins of the Theology of Hope* (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress Publishing, 1974), 86.

⁸³ Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe Der Metaphysik: Welt - Endlichkeit - Einsamkeit*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm Von Herrmann, 3rd ed., GA 29/30 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2004).

aright, he maintained, it was sufficient neither to take it as personal spiritual direction, nor as academic philosophical commentary, but as a redirection of the German orientation to Being as a whole. What was at stake was nothing less than the ‘distant calling’ of the German people to an unprecedented ‘depth of existence and breadth of horizon’ (III.56), spearheaded by a ‘spiritual-intellectual nobility...strong enough to shape the tradition of the Germans anew from out of a great future’ (III.46).

In 1932, Heidegger began to look to Adolf Hitler to rally such an elite. Though he did not invest his vision of spiritual renewal directly in a political programme, Heidegger now began to see ‘metaphysics as meta-politics’ (III.32), earnestly hoping that the ongoing political revolution would act as a catalyst for a second, spiritual-intellectual one. It was this second revolution that Heidegger regarded as the yet-to-be-realized essence of Nazism.

The relation of this ‘spiritual-intellectual Nazism’ (III.72) to the political regime was always volatile. Shortly after assuming the rectorship of Freiburg University in 1932, Heidegger wrote to his friend Elisabeth Blochmann that the political upheavals of the moment were ever at risk of ‘getting stuck in the superficial’, but also had the potential to become the ‘way of a first awakening’ – provided that ‘we are preparing ourselves for a second and deeper one’. In the surge of that second awakening, Nazism as a political party, he thought, would be overcome. The movement, he wrote in 1932, had a responsibility to ‘become nascent’ or ‘begin to begin’ (*werdend werden*), shaping the future by ‘stepping aside as a mere construct in the face of it’ (III.26). If the party did not do so, he warned – if it did not ‘sacrifice itself as a transitional phenomenon’ (III.56), but was itself absolutized (II.153) and treated as ‘complete, eternal truth dropped from heaven’ – then it was merely ‘aberration and folly’. Rather, the present, he emphasized to Blochmann, would only be comprehensible from out of the future.⁸⁴ And if Germany did not continually ‘fight for an existential breadth and depth drawn from the silent essence of being’, it would have ‘squandered its end – a small and laughable end’ (II.218).⁸⁵

This horizon is announced in unambiguously eschatological terms throughout the Black Notebooks as the awaited advent of a ‘last god’.⁸⁶ But this awaited coming elicits not a utopian posture but a being-unto-death. The expectation of a ‘last god’ demands a national enterprise oriented towards its own limit (e.g. III.26, 56, 153), though that limit is not merely an end but also

⁸⁴ Heidegger to Blochmann, 30 March 1933, in Joachim Storck, ed., *Martin Heidegger / Elisabeth Blochmann: Briefwechsel 1918–1969* (Marbach: Deutsches Literaturarchiv, 1990), 60. See also IV.115 and IV.118.

⁸⁵ I have given a fuller account of this subject, including its relation to Hegel, in Judith Wolfe, ‘Religion in the Black Notebooks: Overview and Analysis’, in *Heidegger’s Black Notebooks and the Future of Theology*, ed. Märten Björk and Jayne Svenungsson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 23–48.

⁸⁶ See e.g. IV.179, IV.288, IV.292, V.1, V.4, V.15, etc. See also Martin Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis) (1936–1938)*, ed. F.W. von Herrmann, 3rd ed., GA 65 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2003), esp. 405–419.

a second beginning (see e.g. IV.115, 118). The people, Heidegger is clear, cannot give itself its own essence: it is, after all, precisely the forceful ‘enframing’ of the world (which he now identifies with both Christianity and Nazism) which has caused the present god-forsakenness (e.g. III.132, IV.8). It can only empty itself through ‘complete conversion’ and ‘silent waiting’ (III.142) to prepare a space into which the radically other ‘god’ can descend.

This awaited descent does mark a departure from Heidegger’s early thought; for unlike death, the last god determines the people’s essence not by negation but by donation: The god ‘must already have arrived if a people is to find its essence’ (VII.29). Thus, where *Being and Time* insisted on the unflinching acceptance that no *parousia* would wrest existence from the radical negativity of death, the Black Notebooks arrive at a contrary insistence precisely on the need for openness to a god who must come from without, or doom humankind by remaining absent (e.g. IV.179). This openness remained present in Heidegger’s thought to the last,⁸⁷ and germinated in the more overtly religious thought of philosophical heirs such as Levinas and Marion.⁸⁸ The history of philosophical eschatologies in the later 20th century – a history I hope to reconstruct in a forthcoming monograph – takes its bearings from here.

The task of this article has not been an evaluation but a cartography of philosophical eschatologies in early 20th-century Germany. The uses of such a cartography for theology are both historical and constructive. We cannot understand the explosion of eschatological thought in mid- to late-20th-century theology – Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, Eberhard Jüngel, Robert Jenson, and their followers – except as shaped in this crucible of philosophical-theological questions and constructs. It is clear, for example, that both Moltmann and Pannenberg build their construction of eschatologically oriented theologies of history on the recognition that the ‘eschatology of the absolute moment’ of the dialectical theologians rejected not history *per se* but history on its specifically historicist (*historistisch*) construction. Moltmann and Pannenberg both endeavour not to confirm this history-denying eschatology, but to re-imagine history in a way that opens it out to eschatology.⁸⁹ This frame moves the characteristic strengths but also weaknesses of their immanent eschatologies more clearly into view.

Perhaps more importantly, the often violent consequences of constructing the eschatological end as either necessarily system-inherent or necessarily system-destroying incited

⁸⁷ See e.g. Martin Heidegger, ‘Wozu Dichter? (1946)’, in *Holzwege*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm v Herrmann, 28th ed., GA 5 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2003), 269–320; “‘Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten’: Spiegel-Gespräch mit Martin Heidegger am 23. September 1966”, in *Antwort: Martin Heidegger im Gespräch*, ed. Günther Neske and Emil Kettering (Pfullingen: Neske, 1988), 81–114.

⁸⁸ See now Balász Mezei, *Radical Revelation* (London: T&T Clark, 2017).

⁸⁹ See Essen, *Geschichtstheologie und Eschatologie in der Moderne*, 40.

the renewal of a confidently *theological* eschatology under the sign of a personal God acting freely in, through, and beyond history. Thus, Moltmann emphasises:

However logically clear and linguistically artful theology may be, it is not a closed system but an open one. Theology's openness is twofold: it is open to its origin, i.e., to the motivating and often dangerous memory of Jesus Christ, and it is open to his beckoning and often dangerous hope for the future.⁹⁰

Similarly, Jüngel and his heirs stress that 'eschatology has to do not with anything that can emerge or be constructed from out of the present but with a new reality made possible by divine action. Death and resurrection are dialectically related...yet the latter does not emerge naturally from the former. It is given and comes to us from beyond any immanent possibilities.'⁹¹ The criteria and possibilities of theologically rather than philosophically grounded eschatologies continue to be tested against their philosophical interlocutors.

As theologians stand to lose profoundly from ignoring the philosophical context of what is sometimes called the 'eschatological turn' in 20th-century theology, so I hope to have shown that philosophers stand to gain a great deal by re-engaging the term 'eschatology', which has all but disappeared from the majority's philosophical vocabulary, but is such a profound driver of 19th- and 20th-century European philosophy. Indeed, while eschatology has always been central to theology, and merely took a distinctive form in the 20th century, we may yet come to speak of an eschatological turn in modern German philosophy.

⁹⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, 'Foreword', in *Origins of the Theology of Hope*, by M. Douglas Meeks (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress Publishing, 1974), xiv.

⁹¹ David Fergusson, 'Introduction', David Fergusson and Marcel Sarot, eds., *The Future as God's Gift: Explorations in Christian Eschatology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 2–3.