In Enlightenment Europe, traditional eschatology, in the scholastic form of the doctrine of the four last things, experienced a profound crisis. Developments in epistemology, ethics, and science – including the erosion of any implicit confidence in the reliability of revelation – progressively made dogmatic pronouncements about human reward and punishment after death implausible or ethically unpalatable. But the Enlightenment critique of revelation, though it reconfigured, did not displace the need of theological, philosophical, historical and political thinkers for a projected consummation of life and of history. 18th- and 19th-century theological as well as philosophical thought was, consequently, characterized by an immanentization of traditional eschatological categories like judgement and messianic rule. In the 18th century, the rationalist ethics of Leibniz and Kant pointed to the eschaton as the telos of a philosophically necessary trajectory, fulfilling the ‘order of ends’ of practical reason. In the 19th century, Hegel systematized Schiller’s dictum ‘Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht’ (‘world history is the last judgement’). Eschatology, in other words, became a way of seeing the shape and direction of historical, epistemological and/or ethical progress as a whole, confirming and fuelling particularly the 19th century’s intense desire for continuing change and progress – ethical, intellectual, and political – even beyond the present age.¹

It was part of the scholarly theological orthodoxy of the 20th century to regard the 19th century as a period of eschatological slumber, from which theology roused itself only in the face of the late 19th- and early 20th-century crisis of the West. But this is, to some extent, merely an occluding shadow, cast by a stance that 20th-century eschatology adopted in explicit opposition to the 19th century. 20th-century uses of eschatological motifs and patterns were mostly motivated by a pervasive sense of crisis, radically repudiating the ‘drowsy’ confidence of the 19th century in a natural or achievable continuity between the present and the eschatological future. At the same time, this reversal was only made possible by the 19th-century reconfiguration of eschatology as a whole from a set of doctrines to a structural or methodological principle. That the crisis of Western civilization in the early 20th century should have gone hand in hand with the rejection of eschatological optimism in favour of an emphasis on eschatological crisis is no surprise; but in both, eschatology functions not as a determinate set of beliefs, but as a delineation of the shape and limits of human history and knowledge, relevant not merely to theology but also, though sometimes without being named as such, to philosophy.

First Thematic Approach: Political philosophy and political theology

It is well-documented that the nationalism of 19th-century Germany was always eschatologically inflected. The nationalism of the educated middle classes had, from its beginnings in the Napoleonic Wars, been a glorification of the German national ‘spirit’ (Geist) as nothing less than a pure expression of the quasi-divine ‘world spirit’ which would, in its self-realization, perfect the world. Fichte and Hegel consciously appropriated the Christian apocalyptic tradition especially of Joachim of Fiore, whose apocalyptic periodization of history into the empires of God the Father (Old Testament), the Son (New Testament and Church), and the Holy Spirit (the age to come) served as the model for Hegel’s own periodization in the Philosophy of Religion, and for his eschatological Germanic Realm in the Philosophy of Right. The identification of the World Spirit harnessed by Germany with the Holy Spirit of Scripture made this appropriation of the biblical foretelling of an eschatological outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh (e.g. Joel 2.28–9; Acts 2.17) a natural one.

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This nationalism was, at heart, a matter of education as much as of political or military action, and played into the rise of the German research universities. In 1808, J.G. Fichte published his conviction that it was in Germany that ‘the seed of human perfection is most decisively planted, and to whom progress in this development is entrusted’. ‘If you perish in this your essence’, he exhorted his countrymen, ‘then all hope of the entire human race for salvation from the depths of its evils perishes with you’. In 1821, Hegel declared that Germany’s ascendency would mark the ‘absolute rule’ of Spirit, in which ‘all peoples would find their salvation’.

This spiritual or intellectual nationalism was so deeply rooted that during the First World War, it could be exploited to romanticize German militarism. Friedrich Gogarten described the German national spirit as bearer of revelation and so agent of salvation: ‘To our highest thoughts, the German people and the German spirit are the revelation of eternity’. Sociologist Johann Plenge described the war as a ‘crusade in the service of World Spirit’, whose highest developmental stage was represented by Germany—for which reason the German crusade would ‘redound to the salvation of the world’. Pastor Karl König, having equated ‘the history of the divine spirit [göttliche Geistesgeschichte]’ with ‘the history of the human spirit’, states his conviction that the latter would find its fulfilment in the German spirit. Germany, consequently, had to win the apocalyptically interpreted war, ‘simply because this is a necessity of the history of the human and divine spirit on this earth’. Philosopher Rudolf Eucken, too, insisted that Germany must win the war, as a defeat would ‘rob world history of its deepest meaning’ and ‘signify the downfall of human history’. Philosopher Adolf Lasson concurred in this spiritual interpretation of Germany’s military power: ‘Our army and navy too are a spiritual power’. And König again: ‘This army is an embodiment of our national spirit’. Indeed, the attitude is so common as to be satirized in Karl Kraus’ Last Days

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4 It would of course be worth pursuing, although they are not part of the central narrative of this section, the Marxist versions of this Hegelian eschatology. Ernst Bloch, for example, regarded Messianic language as the husk of an elaboration of human possibility which it was his task to uncover and re-cast in the language of utopianism. Particularly in the revolutionary apocalyptic rhetoric and action of Joachim of Fiore and Thomas Müntzer did Bloch see the beginnings of such a (re-)translation of Messianism into utopianism, and so models for his own and Marxism’s work (see his 1918 Geist der Utopie and his 1921 Thomas Müntzer als Theologe der Revolution). In Prinzip der Hoffnung (1938-47), Bloch reached his mature immanent eschatology: ‘Man still lives everywhere in his pre-history; indeed, everything is still poised before the creation of the world as a just and right one. True genesis occurs not in the beginning but in the end, and it only begins to begin when society and existence are radicalized, i.e. grasp themselves by the root. But the root of history is man, working, creating, changing and outstripping his conditions. When man grasps himself and roots that which is his without self-renunciation and -alienation in real democracy, something emerges in the world which radiates into everyone’s childhood and where no one yet has been: home’ (Das Prinzip Hoffnung [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985], p. 1628).


6 Johann Plenge, Der Krieg und die Volkswirtschaft (Münster: Borgmener, 1915), 200.


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

9 Adolf Lasson, Deutsche Art und deutsche Bildung (Berlin: Carl Heymann, 1914).

10 König, Sechs Kriegspredigten, 15; cited in Vondung, Die Apokalypse in Deutschland, 204.
of Mankind, in whose epilogue ‘Dr.-Ing. Abendrot from Berlin’ appears as a self-declared ‘knight of the Spirit’ (‘Ritter vom Geist’), who concocts lethal gas ‘[u]m endlich den endlichen Endsiege zu kriegen, und dann also endlich unendlich zu siegen’ (‘to finally gain the final final victory, and therefore finally infinitely to triumph’).¹¹

In the traumatized post-war years, many intellectuals, including the German Philosophical Society under neo-Fichtean Bruno Bauch, looked back to Fichte and nineteenth-century romantic nationalism as a framework for the reconstruction of a Germany in crisis. Bauch, like many others, including Heidegger, projected onto Hitler’s promised Reich the quasi-messianic kingdom envisioned by Fichte and Hegel. The intellectual leaders of National Socialism initially strongly encouraged such a projection. Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, author of the programmatic Germany’s Third Empire (1924), chose ‘the Third Reich’ as an epithet for the Germany of the future not just by reference to the two preceding ‘German’ empires, but above all to Joachim of Fiore’s apocalyptic ‘third empire’ of the Holy Spirit.¹² The Christian press did not miss the challenge implied in this claim: The Catholic journal Hochland publically criticized Moeller van den Bruck and the NSDAP as early as 1931 for applying a term properly belonging to a truly universal Christian kingdom to a secular political ‘Ersatzreich’.¹³

A key element of this nationalist vision was a redoubled emphasis on the suffering and struggle that had been part of biblical as well as Hegelian eschatology. In biblical prophecy, the coming of the eschatological age was preceded by its ‘birth pangs’ (Matthew 24.8; Romans 8.22) – by war, persecution, and natural disaster. In Hegel’s rational eschatology, this suffering was folded into the dialectical self-realization of Spirit. The final phase of that self-realization, the ‘Germanic empire’, could, for Hegel, only arise out of ‘infinite pain’ and the confrontation of ‘absolute negativity’.

This is the absolute turning point; spirit rises out of this situation and grasps the infinite positivity of this its inward character, i.e. it grasps the principle of the unity of the divine nature and the human, the reconciliation of objective truth and freedom as the truth and freedom appearing within self-consciousness and subjectivity, a reconciliation with the fulfilment of which the Nordic principle...of the Germanic peoples, has been entrusted.¹⁴

¹¹ Karl Kraus, Die letzten Tage der Menschheit, ed. E. Früh (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992), 278.
¹⁴ Hegel, Philosophy of Right, 1942, sec. 358, translation emended.
The early myth of the Nazi Reich participated fully in this imagery. The condition from which this Reich would be born was one of pain and mourning, symbolized by the ‘sable flag of need, humiliation and utter bitterness’ which he saw flying over Germany, and which Hitler and Goebbels concretized in the ‘blood flag’ of the failed beer hall putsch liturgically paraded as a symbol of the sacrifice necessary for the coming of the kingdom.\(^\text{15}\) Hitler encouraged the apocalyptic terminology of a ‘Third Reich’ until 1938, when he discarded it for more pragmatic language.\(^\text{16}\)

When the German Philosophical Society pledged its allegiance to Hitler in 1933, it was with such a vision in mind.\(^\text{17}\) At its October meeting, to which Hitler sent greetings, Bruno Bauch spoke of National Socialism 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’.\(^\text{18}\) Bauch went on to deliver guest lectures on ‘the people as a structure of nature and meaning’ (\textit{Das Volk als Natur- und Sinngebilde}) and ‘Fichte and the political task of reconstruction of our time’ across Germany.\(^\text{19}\)

This is an important (though not, of course, sufficient) context also for Heidegger’s embrace of National Socialism, which shared with the neo-Fichtean the projection of a spiritual vision of Germany onto an essentially pragmatic regime.\(^\text{20}\) This dimension of his thought and actions of the 1930’s has been significantly illuminated by the publication of Heidegger’s \textit{Black Notebooks} of the period. In 1931, Heidegger opened his notebooks with the repeated complaint that \textit{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

\(^{15}\)See Vondung, ‘National Socialism as a Political Religion: Potentials and Limits of an Analytical Concept’.

\(^{16}\)For a fuller account, see Wolfe, ‘Messianism’.


or not it had been in 1927) for a corporate rather than a merely individual renewal. To understand his book 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 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).21 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.22 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).23

Heidegger’s embrace of the Nazi promise was premised above all on a ‘grotesquely sophisticated receptiveness to [its] initially rhetorical calls for self-sacrifice’,24 inflected by a critique

21 ‘Der Nationalsozialismus nicht als fertige ewige Wahrheit vom Himmel gefallen – so genommen wird er eine Verirrung und Narretei. So, wie er geworden ist, muß er selbst werdend werden und die Zukunft gestalten – d.h. selbst als Gebild vor dieser zurücktreten.’
22 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.
23 ‘Wenn wir uns nicht dahin bringen, daß unsere Geschichte wird ein Erkämpfen des Zuspruchs einer wesentlichen Weite und Tiefe des Daseins aus dem verschwiegenen Wesen des Seins, dann haben wir das Ende verwirkt, und zwar ein kleines und lächerliches Ende.’
of Hegel’s insufficiently radical valorization of negativity or death. In 1929, Heidegger concluded his lectures on Idealism with a discussion of Hegel’s definition of eternity as absolute presence. He shared Hegel’s focus on ‘absolute negativity’ (or ‘death’, as Hegel famously glossed the term in the preface to his *Phenomenology of Spirit*) as the crucible of peoplehood. However, he strongly rejected Hegel’s conception of death as preliminary or sublatable. Where for Hegel, death was a necessary turning point ultimately sublated in the self-realization of Spirit, for Heidegger, it remained (as it had been in *Being and Time*) the ultimate, impossible possibility of human existence which could only be anticipated, yet never grasped or overcome. Heidegger’s critique of a Hegelian understanding of the state, in fact, repeated his earlier critique of Augustine’s eschatology on the level of corporate rather than individual existence. Just as he felt that Augustine had betrayed his aboriginal insight into the radically temporal character of human existence by his neo-Platonic vision of eschatological stasis, 25 so he criticized Hegel for his sublation of negativity into absolute presence.

In the National Socialist rhetoric of sacrifice, Heidegger (absurdly) saw the possibility of a more radical national dedication to being-unto-death than that made possible by Hegel. His 1934/5 lectures on Hölderlin paint a concrete image of a people formed by this dedication. The close fellowship of soldiers at the front, Heidegger maintains there, has nothing to do with shared enthusiasms or distance from other friends.

On the contrary, it finds its source solely and most deeply in the fact that the closeness of death as sacrifice had first set each in the same nullity, which then became the source of unconditional co-belonging. Precisely that death, which each human being has to die on his or her own, and which isolates each individual to the utmost, precisely that death and the readiness for its sacrifice are what first creates the space of community from which fellowship springs. Does fellowship therefore arise from fear? No and yes. No, if like the philistine one means by fear only the helpless trembling of panic-stricken cowardice. Yes, if one understands fear as the metaphysical proximity to the unconditioned which is granted only to the highest independence and readiness. Unless we force powers into our existence [*Dasein*] which bind and isolate through free sacrifice as unconditionally as death – i.e. which grasp at the roots of each individual’s existence – and are rooted as deeply and fully in genuine knowledge, there can be no ‘fellowship’, but at best a modified societal form. 26

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The urgency of this national re-orientation towards being-unto-death was the primary motor of Heidegger’s public speeches as Rector. Throughout 1933, he called students to ‘grow unceasingly in [their] courage to sacrifice [themselves] for the salvation of our people’s essence’, 27 ‘led by the relentlessness of that spiritual mission that forces the destiny of the German people into the shape of its history’. 28 What is significant here is not so much the rhetoric of sacrifice, but the fact that in Heidegger’s vision, the people’s ‘essence’ was not something pre-existing the willing anticipation of death, but arising from that sacrifice itself. The people’s ‘spiritual mission’ was not substantive but performative, driven, like the sacrifice that realized it, by the essential questionableness of existence. ‘[I]n our present time’, Heidegger had told his students in 1930, ‘we have no footing in any objective, universally binding knowledge or power; the only foothold [Halt] that remains to us is our bearing [Haltung]’. 29 And his Rectorial Address in 1933 concluded: ‘This people works at its fate by…continually fighting for [erkämpfen] its spiritual world anew. Thus exposed to the most extreme questionableness of its own existence, this people wills to be a spiritual people’. 30 As James Phillips put it so well, ‘Heidegger’s nationalism in 1933 was not…the “psychological solution” to the anxiety of 1927, but, on the contrary, its formulation as a philosophical-political program’. 31

It is crucial to note, nevertheless, that the redirection of the call to being-unto-death from the individual to the Volk does not leave intact the radical commitment to mortality which fuels that call in Being and Time. In that earlier work, as we recall, Heidegger derives moral responsibility from the nature of the human person, which has no fixed essence, but consists precisely in possibility – that is, in the human orientation towards a future self which is shaped (but not predetermined) by both internal and external forces. This basic potentiality of the human person seems ordered towards the achievement of a whole and therefore true self. But this orderedness towards fulfillment, on Heidegger’s account, is ultimately illusory, for the paradigmatic possibility of human life turns out to be the final and unavoidable possibility of death, which is at the same time the impossibility of any longer being a self. The nature of each human person thus presents itself as a

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27 ‘Unaufhörlich wachse Euch der Mut zum Opfer für die Rettung des Wesens und für die Erhöhung der innersten Kraft unseres Volkes in seinem Staat’; Martin Heidegger, ‘Aufruf an die deutschen Studenten’, Freiburger Studentenzeitung 8, no. 1 (3 November 1933); rpt. in Bernhard Martin, Martin Heidegger und das ’Dritte Reich’: Ein Kompendium (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989), 177.


29 Heidegger, [Studenten ehren Professor Heidegger] (1930), in Heidegger, 755-8; p. 758.

30 Heidegger, 114.

31 Phillips, Heidegger’s Volk, 76.
question to that person which cannot ultimately be answered, but only sustained as question. Being-onto-death is the resolute living-out of that sustainment.\(^{32}\)

On the national level, Heidegger repeats the structure of an undetermined essence yet to be realized in active choice and struggle, whose active moment of self-realization, however, is structured not linearly towards fulfilment, but peripetically towards an eschatological end that is both telos and catastrophe.

The first aspect of this structure – German ‘nature’ as task rather than given – is a frequent theme of the Black Notebooks. ‘The true essence of the Germans’, Heidegger writes in 1938, for example, ‘demands of them the fight for their essence; this fight must itself be fought for’ (VII.34).\(^{33}\) ‘Culture’, on this understanding, is nothing other than ‘the warlike fabric of the existence and destiny of a people exposed to god and history (war in the sense of polemos)’ (III.148). Both the National Socialist programme and the Christian Church demonstrate their weakness precisely by foreclosing this calling by a premature definition of humanity and Germanness. ‘But who would presume’, Heidegger protests at the restriction of the school curriculum to poets ‘promoting…German folkdom [Volkstum]’, ‘especially in such confused “times,” to fix for “eternity” what it is to be German and a people – at a time which perhaps is itself nothing but the result of a misidentification of Germanness on the basis of nationalism.’ (VII.34).\(^{34}\)

It is the second aspect – the peripetetic horizon of this task of self-realization – that is more puzzling. This horizon is announced in unambiguously eschatological terms throughout the Black Notebooks as the awaited advent of a ‘last god’.\(^{35}\) But while this advent demands a national enterprise oriented towards its own limit (e.g. III.26, 56, 153), that limit is not merely an end but also 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. Unlike death, this god determines

\(^{32}\) For a fuller version of this account, see Wolfe, *Heidegger’s Eschatology*, chap. 6.

\(^{33}\) ‘Das wahre Wesen der Deutschen fordert von ihnen den Kampf um ihr Wesen; dieser Kampf muss daher selbst erst einmal erkämpft werden.’

\(^{34}\) ‘Wer will sich denn vermessen, in einer dazu noch so wirren “Zeit”, für die “Ewigkeit” festzumachen, was deutsch und was ein Volk sei, zu einer Zeit, die vielleicht selbst nur die Folge einer Wesensverkennung des Deutschen auf Grund des Nationalismus ist.’

\(^{35}\) 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.
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).36

Where Being and Time insisted on the unflinching acceptance that no parousia would wrest existence from the radical negativity of death, therefore, 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 remains central to Heidegger’s thought to the last, when he tells an incredulous Spiegel reporter in a final interview:

Philosophy will not be able to bring about an immediate change in the current state of the world. This is true not only of philosophy, but of all merely human thought and desire. Only a god can now save us. I see the only possibility of rescue in preparing, through thought and poetry, a readiness for the appearance of this god or for the absence of this god in our downfall; so that we will not, to put it crudely, ‘croak’, but, if we go down, go down in the face of the absent god.

[Philosophy and the individual can do nothing more than] prepare this readiness to hold themselves open for the arrival or non-appearance of the god. Even the experience of non-appearance is not nothing, but a liberation of man from what I have called, in Being and Time, his addiction to that-which-is.37

It is important to stress that this posture of openness cannot be interpreted as a return to Christianity. Even on an understanding of Christianity as vitiated rather than essentially constituted by an onto-theological understanding of God and the world, Heidegger’s radical apophaticism regarding the nature of the god to come is at basic odds with the Christian orientation by and towards a revelation of God that has already occurred. Nevertheless, Heidegger’s last god represents a significant revision of his thought whose provenance and significance is, I submit, the central puzzle of the Black Notebooks in their relevance for theology. It will take sustained work to delineate the contribution of these difficult texts to what we already know of Heidegger’s ‘last god’ from his volumes on Hölderlin and Contributions to Philosophy.

2. Second Thematic Approach: Philosophies of History / Historicism:

Historicism (in the sense of German ‘Historismus’, not ‘Historizismus’) as a philosophy of history arose in 19th-century Germany as a repudiation of Hegelian and other strongly teleological

36 ‘Ein Gott ist nur Jener und Jene, die den Menschen dem “Seienden” entreissen, das Seyn ernöten als das Zwischen für sie selbst und für den Menschen; jene, die zuerst gekommen sein müssen, wenn ein Volk zu seinem Wesen finden soll.’

accounts of historical development. Historians stressed the unique contexts, pressures and players 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. 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 sort of primitive Christianity 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. (Of course the historicist and the Hegelian approach to Christianity could, to some extent, be combined, e.g. in Ritschl, who thought we should gladly leave behind the wild apocalypticism of Jesus’ followers for an immanent Kingdom of God of rational civil ethics.)

In the 1920’s, historicism was embroiled in much-vaunted crisis: Ernst Troeltsch and others accused it of precipitating the great cultural crisis of the time by relativizing all values and denying all shape to history. The language of crisis was certainly pervasive in contemporaneous publications, reflected in titles such as Rudolf Pannwitz’s *Krisis der europäischen Kultur* (1917), Paul Ernst’s *Der Zusammenbruch des deutschen Idealismus* (1918), Oswald Spengler’s *Untergang des Abendlandes* (1918/1922), and Arthur Liebert’s *Die geistige Krisis der Gegenwart* (1924). Liebert saw it as his task 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.

This consummate crisis of all crises lay, for Liebert, in ‘the fatal historical scepticism and relativism nourished by historicism.’

Writers like Oswald Spengler attempted a re-integration of historicist particularity into a quasi-biological theory of cultural decline. (It is worth noting here that despite the luridly apocalyptic

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title of his magnum opus, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, his was by no means an eschatological account of history, but a broadly cyclical one, premised on the quasi-biological rise, senescence and dissolution of civilizations.) Theologians like Paul Tillich and the movement of *Zwischen den Zeiten* (later known as dialectical theology), meanwhile, tried to cast the crisis of historicism as bearing eschatological significance. They did so 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.

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. In their responses, as in Schweitzer’s, it is ‘impossible to relate the concept of eschatology positively to that of history’; ‘theologically, we can assert only the strict impossibility of mediating between eschatology and history’.

According to Tillich, Gerhard Sauter writes, ‘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*.41

For Gogarten, Barth, and Bultmann, too, the absolute can be found only in an existential encounter with God which is ‘eschatological’ not in the sense of a culmination of history but in that of an irruption of the eternal into time in a Kierkegaardian ‘oyeblik’. ‘Every moment has the potential of being the eschatological moment’, as Bultmann will later say; ‘if only we seize it’. Ernst Troeltsch called Gogarten’s theology in a more critical vein a ‘theology of the absolute moment’.

Eschatology here becomes a ‘placeholder for the question about the truth of Christian theology’, not ‘a final section of systematic theology’.43 In other words, it gives up its temporal dimension as the culmination of history as a whole, in favour of a preservation of its radical otherness. For Bultmann (again admittedly quoted here from his 1955 Gifford Lectures), ‘history has reached its end’ with the cross, the definitive crisis of all reality. The church ‘is the community of the end-time, an eschatological phenomenon. How could it have a history now when the world-

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42 Troeltsch, ‘Ein Apfel vom Baume Kierkegaards (1921)’; quoted in Essen, *Geschichtstheologie und Eschatologie in der Moderne*, 34.
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.\footnote{Rudolf Bultmann, \textit{History and Eschatology} (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1957), 43.}

Like my account of political philosophy (in the first section above), this narrative culminates, to some extent, in Heidegger, who develops a broadly ‘existential’ eschatology in response to similar sources as Barth et al (Paul, Augustine, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Overbeck), but challenges historicism much more radically than the dialectical theologians. (It is perhaps, among others, in this regard that he regarded Barth as a philosophical lightweight.) For Heidegger, the real significance of historicist insights was not that the philosopher of history could survey and categorize the vicissitudes of history from his armchair, but that he, too, was existentially historical or temporal, unable to secure his existence in a foothold outside the flux of history. Eschatology, for Heidegger in the late 1910’s and early 1920’s, became a way of acknowledging that inescapable historicity: in Paul’s exhortation to the Thessalonians, and in Augustine’s \textit{cor inquietum}, he found an authentic attitude to our own existence always oriented towards a future we cannot foresee or control.\footnote{See Martin Heidegger, \textit{Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens}, ed. Matthias Jung, Thomas Regehly, and Claudius Strube, GA 60 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1995).}

As I have argued at length elsewhere, Heidegger’s \textit{Existenzphilosophie} both retrieved and contested early Christian eschatology. From its diathetic phenomenological perspective, the ‘existential’ experience of expectation not only could but should be divorced from its (dogmatically postulated) object, the ‘blessed hope’ of the coming Kingdom of God. In fact, that hope, in Heidegger’s account, came to seem not constitutive of, but rather as inimical to ‘eschatological’ unrest, because it projected an end to that unrest, and so a cancellation of the nexus of authentic existence.

Against the Christian vision, Heidegger thus developed, in the mid-1920’s, an eschatology without eschaton that culminated in his account of being-unto-death in \textit{Being and Time}. On this account, its own being is, at the deepest level, a \textit{question} for each person. This question cannot be answered or resolved in any traditional sense, because as soon as a person’s existence is complete and therefore in theory intelligible, that person is no longer there to be capable of understanding it. The consummation of one’s existence – death – is at the same time its negation. To live authentically within these conditions can only mean to live in resolute anticipation of this perpetual, inavertible, and inescapably personal possibility: to ‘be unto death’ \footnote{See my \textit{Heidegger’s Eschatology}, chaps 3–6.}.
This eschatology without eschaton is a scintillating foil to dialectical theology’s eschatology of crisis, and deserves closer attention in that role. From a theological perspective, Heidegger might here be seen as interrogating Barth’s neglect of the temporal dimension of eschatology. Conversely, Barth, and above all Gogarten, might be seen as pressing the need to be able to speak of the genuinely new. While for Heidegger, it is being-unto-death that defines the historicity of human existence, for Gogarten, history – in the sense of ‘something happening’ – takes place only ‘when a Thou faces an I and is acknowledged [anerkann] in its claims by the I’. Bultmann, defending Gogarten, expresses this idea and its implications in a paragraph of dense theological-philosophical prose:

Love is only possible in Christ. What does that mean? To answer this, we must recall that on the one hand, love is not the concrete purpose of a resolution which Dasein can simply take, but is rather the ‘how’ of resolution, which first reveals its purpose; on the other hand, love is not (like historicity) a characteristic of Dasein as such (an existentiale) but rather an ontic determination of resolution. Since these things are the case, I can only appropriate my own factic thereness [Da] as someone who loves if I am already loved, i.e. already immersed in love, and if the fact that I am always already loved is promised me by the proclamation of Christ and appropriated in faith.

In other words, authentic resolution (of the kind that grasps its own historicity) is only possible when motivated by love. But loving is only possible if one is already loved, and it is this ‘already’ which is revealed and received in faith. What is more, it is only from this standpoint of knowing oneself to have always already been loved by God that one is capable of seeing natural existence (the ‘world’ of Bultmann’s earlier article) as always already graced, ‘as creation’.

This means that the theologian cannot ultimately accept the philosopher’s analysis as final. For from the perspective gained by faith, the resolution to face death in solitude must appear not authentic but inauthentic, because death is not in fact solitary: It is always shared with Christ. And yet this cannot be known in advance of the proclamation of the gospel. This perspective also entails a critique of Heidegger’s central term ‘possibility’. For ultimately, Bultmann argues, Heidegger’s analysis neutralizes this term by disallowing anything genuinely new ever to happen to Dasein. Possibility must indeed, as Heidegger implicitly argues in Part II of Being and Time, be defined eschatologically: but eschatology must be allowed to retain its irruptive character, its promise of the advent of something new and unanticipated.

48 Bultmann, 259.
49 Bultmann, 253.
I have also argued elsewhere, though without much elaboration, that while Heidegger’s analysis is a virtuoso *plaidoyer* for the ineluctable finitude of human existence, its pathos depends on the assumption of a desire to transcend finitude which the analysis itself cannot and does not attempt to account for. The passionate acts of ‘shattering oneself against death’ or bearing its ‘affliction’ which characterize authentic human existence are predicated on a contrary longing which is as consistently assumed as it is obfuscated by Heidegger’s analysis. This is a further area for worthwhile discussion of his philosophy vis-à-vis questions of eschatology.)

**Third Thematic Approach: Idealism vs. Existentialism**

[This requires greater elaboration.]

In Ernst Troeltsch’s defining article on eschatology in the 1910 edition of *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, eschatology is nothing other than the core of religion: religion (as opposed to science and, above all, historical science) proclaims the last things in the sense of ultimate truths and values. The projection of the consummation of these values to the end of time is, for Troeltsch, partly a recognition of the nearly infinite chain of immanent or secular relations and dependencies that need to be thought through, enunciated, and/or experienced before these last things can come into view. Everything else about the religious eschatological imagination, Troeltsch reasons, is mythological embellishment of this basic orientation. Religion, in its commitment to ‘last things’, will never be science; but it is an indispensable anchor for humanity in its scientific pursuits.

In this definition, Troeltsch aligns Christian eschatology closely with neo-Kantian idealism (as exemplified around the same time e.g. by Ernst Cassirer): the human person is *capax infinitatis* by reason and free will. This is well expressed in Schiller’s poem ‘Das Ideal und das Leben’, so admired by idealist philosophers including Cassirer:

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Nur der Körper eignet jenen Mächten,
Die das dunkle Schicksal flechten,
Aber frei von jeder Zeitgewalt,
Die Gespielin seliger Naturen
Wandelt oben in des Lichtes Fluren,
Göttlich unter Göttern, die Gestalt.
Wollt ihr hoch auf ihren Flügeln schweben,
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Werft die Angst des Irdischen von euch.
Fliehet aus dem engen, dumpfen Leben
In des Ideales Reich!

This understanding of eschatology (standing beside the immanentized eschaton of Hegel et al as the main eschatological paradigm in 19th-century philosophy), in which religion and neo-Kantian idealism are one, is challenged by the notion of religion developed e.g. in Hermann Cohen’s last work, *Rational Religion out of the Sources of Judaism*, in which religion is opposed to ethics as that which concerns the individual and particular rather than the communal and universal. Peter Gordon has given a strong account of the contested reception of that work among neo-Kantians as a perceived rupture with Cohen’s earlier neo-Kantian work.

Franz Rosenzweig, championing this last *magnum opus* against attempts to re-fold it into Cohen’s earlier work, developed Cohen’s own understanding of religion as an opposed to idealism. The famous opening lines of his *Star of Redemption* (1921) explicitly repudiate Schiller’s exhortation to throw off the fear of the earthly, and instead call the fear of death the fount of all wisdom.

Rosenzweig then develops an eschatology-within-time precisely as the *antidote* to the perceived lack of eschatology in Cassirer’s idealism. This is an eschatology that begins in the vein of Franz Overbeck, who wrote forty years earlier: ‘eschatology teaches us exactly what death teaches us, no more and no less’. In the course of *The Star of Redemption*, it grows into a strange but powerful vision of eschatological redemption within time for the Jewish people, who for Rosenzweig occupy the place of the individual and particular that the late Cohen had drawn into the domain of religion (contrasting with Christendom, which is part of the flux of history). Karl Löwith contrasts Rosenzweig’s eschatology here with Heidegger’s, ascribing to Rosenzweig a belief in and to Heidegger a denial of eternity; but Rosenzweig’s ‘eternity’, as Gordon has shown, is much more ambiguous than Löwith makes out.

Once again, Heidegger looms large in this thematic cluster. He, too, resists neo-Kantianism (and, as important within his academic upbringing, neo-Scholasticism) by developing an eschatological account of the individual oriented towards death, constituted by that which definitively bars all further knowledge rather than by the ideal realm towards which we can escape earthly bounds. Eschatology – an orientation towards the ‘last thing’ of death – here becomes a

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reassertion of the *temporal* dimension of knowledge and existence, which is always towards death, against an a-temporal God’s-eye-view of the world.

**Fourth Thematic Approach: Trajectories and Ends**

A fourth approach investigates implicit structural questions rather than explicit thematic concerns. This approach is therefore more abstract and speculative, and requires more expansive historical framing than the preceding three.

As already mentioned, eschatology in the late 18th and early 19th century became a structural framework ensuring the progress of history, knowledge, and/or ethics, even beyond the present age. But 19th-century thinkers trying to make eschatology fruitful for philosophical thought more generally, encountered fundamental tensions within the subject matter that sent tremors through their systems, but erupted into philosophical revolutions only during the 20th century. One of the most significant was the tension between trajectories and endpoints which quietly dominated both Kant’s and Hegel’s eschatologies.

Kant established the connection between ethics and eschatology by describing practical reason – the human faculty that guides (moral) action in conformity to universal moral norms – not as a merely nomological but as 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’.

Because it is plain that this correlation of goodness and happiness is not achievable in the present life, Kant posits 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. Kant’s argument does not, of course, erect God as a guarantor of rational laws, but rather points to the harmony of natural reason and the existence of God. Eschatology, here, is the articulation or reification of the end point of a teleology inherent in rational human existence.

In his 1794 article ‘The End of All Things’, which aims to reel eschatological speculation back within the confines of reason, Kant frames eschatology as a matter not of science or

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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 images of final judgement in the New Testament are merely ‘a way of making sensible’ the idea of an ultimate moral judgement and its consequences, and are not themselves grounds of eschatological belief.\(^{57}\)

Although speculative reason cannot conceptualize a state beyond space and time, he continues, practical reason must nevertheless project such a final state, because it perceives value in any duration of the world only insofar as ‘rational creatures are in it according to the final purpose [\textit{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’.\(^{58}\) Kant admitted that it was a scandal to the imagination that there should be a state without change.\(^{59}\) ‘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’.\(^{60}\) And yet the final purpose of existence, the \textit{sumnum bonum}, can only be imagined as a static end, not as an infinite progress (because every stage of such a progress would be deficient by comparison to the next, and therefore could not warrant contentment).\(^{61}\) We cannot get away from positing this static end point, even though we also cannot imagine it without imagining it as the annihilation of life itself. The idea of a dissolution of individuality into a divine All is no adequate solution for Kant: it is only a \textit{Schwärmerei} (‘enthusiasm’ or ‘fanaticism’) of reason faced with the inability to imagine a state of changeless existence.\(^{62}\)

For Hegel, history is the dialectical self-realization of Spirit. Self-realization always includes self-knowledge, particularly knowledge of one’s freedom. Harking back to Kant, Hegel’s history is therefore a ‘progress in the consciousness of freedom’.\(^{63}\) This also means that history can only be understood from its end, which brings fullness of knowledge (both abstract and concrete).

God, here, is not beyond history so as to irrupt into it and bring disclosure, but is himself constituted in and through history. ‘World History’, as Hegel references Schiller, ‘is the Last Judgement’.\(^{64}\) The Last Judgement, in other words, becomes not an eschatological but a history-


\(^{58}\) Kant, 224.

\(^{59}\) Kant, 227.

\(^{60}\) Kant.

\(^{61}\) Kant, 228.

\(^{62}\) Kant.


immanent event, just as history itself, that is, ‘the process of development and realization of spirit, is the true theodicy, the justification of God in history’.\textsuperscript{65}

Hegel, like Kant, recognizes the ideational importance of consummation or an end point: thus, he criticizes Fichte’s epistemology for positing ‘a constant progression…which never reaches an end’ in the engagement of subject and object.\textsuperscript{66} He himself seeks to ‘resolve [this] infinite progress into the End’,\textsuperscript{67} and posits a ‘final concord’\textsuperscript{68} of subject and object, a ‘consummation of the infinite End’ of knowledge and the world.\textsuperscript{69} This is why Hegel speaks of the ‘absolute End of history’,\textsuperscript{70} where Spirit, as Daniel Berthold puts it, ‘has fulfilled its eschatological design, the realization of its freedom and the attainment of its complete knowledge of itself’.\textsuperscript{71} But this identification of philosophical knowledge with \textit{wholeness} – with ‘comprehending nothing less than the entire system of consciousness, or the entire realm of the truth of spirit’\textsuperscript{72} – is in profound tension with Hegel’s other commitment, namely to ‘both knowledge and being as in their very essence dialectical and teleological processes of becoming’,\textsuperscript{73} whose vitality lies precisely in their dynamic of growth, and for which stasis would spell death. Many commentators note this. Stanley Rosen writes that ‘if we achieve the Hegelian science of totality, we must cease to become human’.\textsuperscript{74} Karl Löwith,\textsuperscript{75} Robert Solomon,\textsuperscript{76} and Herbert Marcuse\textsuperscript{77} 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.\textsuperscript{78}

Both Kant and Hegel thus require hypothetical end points to sustain their systems, but these end points cannot be part of their systems themselves; in Kant’s case, the immortality of the soul and the existence of a good God are postulates of practical reason, not conceptualizable; in Hegel’s case, the final epoch of absolute Spirit is both a necessary projected end point and an impossibility. Both remind us of Schleiermacher’s concern about the apparently unresolvable

\textsuperscript{65} Hegel, \textit{Lectures on the Philosophy of History}, 477.
\textsuperscript{68} Hegel, \textit{Science of Logic}, §24 addendum.
\textsuperscript{69} Hegel, \textit{Science of Logic}, §212 addendum.
\textsuperscript{70} Hegel, \textit{Lectures on the Philosophy of History}, 163; Hegel, \textit{Lectures on the History of Philosophy}, vol. 1, 35.
\textsuperscript{71} Daniel Berthold-Bond, ‘Hegel’s Eschatological Vision: Does History Have a Future?’, \textit{History and Theory} 27, no. 1 (1 February 1988), 15.
\textsuperscript{73} Berthold-Bond, ‘Hegel’s Eschatological Vision’, 16.
\textsuperscript{78} As suggested e.g. in Hegel, \textit{Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion}, §343.
ambiguity in Christian teaching between eschatology as the natural end point of a worldly system and eschatology as supernatural imposition.

This tension, more intractable than Kant’s antinomies of reason, becomes decisive for the philosophical turns proposed between the wars by Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger.

Walter Benjamin fiercely contests any continuity between ‘profane’ history and the coming of the Messiah:

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.79

This impossibility of anticipating the Messiah in history leads, for Benjamin, to the necessity of viewing history as both doomed to catastrophe and tragically unable to end. In the ninth thesis of ‘On the Concept of History’, Benjamin expresses this pessimism in quasi-religious language:

There is a picture by Klee called Angelus Novus. It depicts an angel who seems to be about to depart from something at which he stares. His eyes and mouth are wide open and his wings unfurled. The angel of history must look like that. His face is turned towards the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one enormous catastrophe incessantly heaping ruins on ruins and flinging them at his feet. Fain would he tarry, rouse the dead, and join what is broken. But a storm blows from Paradise, which has been caught in his wings and is so strong that the angel can no longer furl them. This storm drives him relentlessly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the heap of ruins before him mounts up to heaven. What we call progress is this storm.80

Hannah Arendt gives this a specifically anti-Hegelian reading: the ‘angel of history’ does not ‘dialectically advance, his face facing forward to the future’, but faces the past. But his wish to tarry, rouse the dead, and join what is broken (‘which would supposedly bring the end of history’) is denied him by the guardians of Paradise, who repel intruders not only by the sword but by a stormy headwind.81

This is a distinctively Jewish vision, in which the ‘transcendent’ element of a Messiah has been separated from the expectation of 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 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.82

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 The Last Days of Mankind depicts World War I, and ends with 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’.83 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.

Martin Heidegger’s being-unto-death is a more radically philosophical response to the tension between trajectories and ends within 19th-century philosophical eschatology. At its simplest, Heidegger’s account of human existence in Being and Time is ‘eschatological’ because it envisions the possibility of authentic existence as dependent on a certain (existential) relation to one’s future. 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 fully foresee nor fully control. One of the philosopher’s guiding questions is whether and how it is possible to live authentically within these conditions. ‘Authenticity’, for Heidegger, is the meta-ethical ideal of human existence: the ideal of being ‘true to’ the nature of the world and to one’s own character. This ideal has a long history within philosophical accounts of human existence, although the concomitant metaphysical understanding of the nature or character to which one is to be true has changed radically, stretching from Plato’s hierarchical cosmos of noumena over phenomena to the modern search for an elusive ‘real me’ over against social influence and public roles.84

83 Kraus, Die letzten Tage der Menschheit, 280.
84 Excellent historical-philosophical accounts of this shift can be found in several of Charles Taylor’s works, esp. Sources of the Self (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), chapters 1-2, and The Ethics of Authenticity (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992).
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’.

Heidegger is thus an eschatological thinker in the sense that an ‘eschatological ideal’ is basic to his description of human existence. He argues that we can apprehend in the fragmentary conditions of this life an ideal towards which humans strive, but whose attainment is impossible. Despite this impossibility, however, it is from the perspective of that ideal that our current strivings and failings can and must be recognized and evaluated. Wholeness, for Heidegger (here following Kierkegaard), must at least be conceptually projectable if the realization of its absence or impossibility can become an enduringly defining fact of human life.

The relationship between this philosophical approach and that of theology is complex and shifting. ‘Metaphysical philosophies of the ordinary’ such as Heidegger’s tend to caricature Christianity as paradigmatic of the metaphysical presumptuousness that it is the human task to resist. In his early work, the philosopher accuses Christianity (especially Paul and Augustine) of distorting the proper orientation of humans towards death by superimposing on it the assurance of a life after death which is free from uncertainty and vulnerability, and characterised by the static contemplation of God as the sumnum bonum. In his later, post-metaphysical work, Heidegger identifies the Christian doctrine of a Creator God as the origin or at least archetype of the modern impulse to ‘enframe’ humanity and the world as a whole within a scaffold of pre-determined natures, set and surveilled by an omniscient creator. On this view, Christianity simply reinforces

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the problem of mortal longings, by metaphysically validating an ambition for transcendence which should in fact be acknowledged as problematic.

Heidegger’s own philosophy, by contrast, can be described as ethical inflections of the (Kantian) problem of metaphysics, centring 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 is 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. This is another rich area for dialogue with Christian eschatology.

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To what extent is it useful to group all these as eschatologies, or, from a different perspective, to see them as contestations over the question what eschatology means? What kind of argument should emerge from this survey: a normative account of eschatology which provides an explanatory framework for the Irrwege of various thinkers and epochs? A template for Christianity of the dimensions and complexities it must take into account when constructing a (specifically Christian) eschatology? A demonstration of the antinomies of the concept of eschatology? A historical map describing the remarkable family resemblances between certain clusters of discussions which warrant the ‘family name’ ‘eschatology’? A genealogy of modernity that (like Löwith) shows the central but unacknowledged importance of religious eschatology, and the perils of severing it from its Judaeo-Christian roots?
That is one of the questions I’d like to table for discussion at our colloquium.

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