

CHAPTER FOUR

Eternity in Kant and Post-  
Kantian European Thought

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French philosopher Alain Badiou (1937–) is on a mission to rescue the concept of eternity. In modern European thought, he argues, the idea has fallen into near-oblivion as a result of the baleful influence of a philosophy of “finitude” tracing back to Immanuel Kant (1724–1804).<sup>1</sup> As a result, both of the twin pillars of European thought—the historicism of G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) and the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938)—are hostile environments for the eternal: for historicism, the eternal must be historicized, that is to say, temporalized; and while many strands of phenomenology are critical of everyday “clock” temporality, the contrast they develop to everyday

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<sup>1</sup> The very first page of Badiou’s *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event*, 2, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009) excoriates the “dogma of our finitude,” 1; similarly “Kant is the inventor of the disastrous theme of our ‘finitude,’” 535.

temporality is not eternity but a deeper, lived, ecstatic temporality of which the eternal is only a distorted, theoreticized image.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps this outcome is not surprising. Traditionally the eternal is a primarily theological concept, and the equation of modernity and secularization would lead one to expect a declining interest: one commentator operating under such assumptions bemoans a paradoxical “death of eternity.”<sup>3</sup> But news of this death has been proverbially exaggerated. Although it is indeed unusual for a modern European thinker to emphasize the eternal to the extent that Badiou does, many philosophers in the nineteenth century—among them F. W. J. Schelling (1775–1854), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900)—were preoccupied with the eternal. Even Kant—and Badiou is right to say that he dominates the development of European philosophy in the nineteenth century—is less hostile to the idea than Badiou suggests.

The story of eternity is not as simple as a secularization narrative implies. Instead it follows something like the trajectory of reversal in Kant’s practical proof for the existence of god. In that proof, god emerges not as an object of theoretical investigation but as a postulate required by our practical engagement with the world; so, similarly, the eternal is not just secularized out of existence but becomes understood as an entailment of, and somehow imbricated in, the conditions of our practical existence.

The sections that follow discuss some of those central figures in modern European philosophy whose views prominently feature some consideration of eternity. I start with Kant in section 1. Kant’s critique of speculative theology is well known, and this hostility would appear to make it unlikely that the eternal, with all its theological baggage,

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2 As Heidegger remarks in his 1928 *Being and Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), “even the ‘non-temporal’ and the ‘supra-temporal’ are ‘temporal’ with regard to their being,” 40.

3 Carlos Eire, *A Very Brief History of Eternity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 205.

would feature prominently in his critical philosophy. But in fact Kant's transcendental idealism endorses no fewer than three different concepts of the eternal, including what turns out to be the most historically influential idea: that practical reason involves a kind of eternal, nontemporal action. Kant shifts this notion of a nontemporal act from its original theological context of god's *actus purus* to a practical context, setting the stage for Schelling's and Kierkegaard's later development of this theme. Sections 3 to 9 detail these developments. But before that, section 2 is devoted to Hegel. Hegel's radical historicism is perhaps more than anything else responsible for making "the nineteenth century preeminently the historical century."<sup>4</sup> Hegel is not fertile soil for the concept of the eternal, but his historicism does turn out, at a crucial moment in the philosophy of nature, to presuppose a certain conception of eternity as an eternal present. Perhaps more important for the further development of eternity in nineteenth century thought, however, is that both Schelling and Kierkegaard situate their views of the eternal in the context of a collective rejection of Hegel. Section 3 discusses Schelling, who returns to Kant's conception of nontemporal choice, seeing human capacities for free eternal self-creation as rivaling god's. Such powers are required, Schelling argues, to resist the sublimation of the individual human person into the blankness of the Absolute. Section 4 briefly considers Schopenhauer's view that the in-itself of everything is an endlessly striving will. Section 5 concerns Kierkegaard, who is strongly committed to the eternal and indeed criticizes Hegel for compromising his conception of it by thinking it temporally; but Kierkegaard is obsessed by the paradoxical question of our practical "access" to the eternal within a particular temporal moment: the decisive moment, imbued with significance, that can turn life around and create a new person, pushing Schelling's concerns even further. The remaining, shorter sections present briefer

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4 Peter Gay, *The Naked Heart: The Bourgeois Experience Victoria to Freud* (New York: Norton, 1996), 193.

accounts of more recent figures who make important use of some conception of the eternal: Nietzsche's eternal return (section 6), the theory of sovereignty elaborated by Agamben (1942–) (section 7) and finally Badiou's unapologetic attempt to resuscitate eternity as the condition of revolutionary political change (section 8). I end with a concluding meditation (section 9).

## I KANT

The critical aspect of Kant's critical philosophy is an attack on rationalism both in metaphysics and theology. The basic contours of his case are well known. Cognition in general is, for Kant, split into two basic components: concepts and intuitions (broadly: sensory perceptions of spatiotemporal particulars), and objective cognitive experience is possible only through the synthesis of the two: "thoughts without concepts are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind."<sup>5</sup> This view concedes that it is possible to *think*—in some empty way—what goes beyond the possibility of sensory perception (B146).<sup>6</sup> But rationalist metaphysics and theology falsely conflate thinking with genuine cognition, presupposing that one can gain objective (synthetic) knowledge of the way things are using procedures of pure reasoning a priori. For human beings, actual cognition is limited by the finite nature of human sensory apparatus.

More than half of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is devoted to this attack and attempts to demonstrate that rationalist metaphysics and theology must make use of illicit "dialectical" arguments. In two important cases this attempt bears on questions concerning the

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<sup>5</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason, Gesammelte Schriften*, 23 vols. (Berlin: Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1910–), A51/B76; translation from Allan Wood and Paul Guyer (eds) *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 193–194. All references to Kant's texts hereafter refer to the English title (where appropriate) followed by the Akademie edition volume and page number; the *Critique of Pure Reason* will be referred to by the standard A/B formula for the first (1782, vol. 4) and second (1787, vol. 3) edition pagination.

<sup>6</sup> Wood and Guyer translation, 254.

eternal: in the Paralogisms Kant takes on the immortality of the soul; and in the First Antinomy, the question of whether the world is eternal, that is, unlimited in temporal extent. Applying the distinction between mere thought and cognition, Kant does not argue *against* the immortality of the soul or the unlimited temporal extent of the world. Rather, he argues that although the requisite entities can be coherently thought, they can never be produced in intuition, hence cognition of them is impossible. So arguments that purport to demonstrate that we can know that anything is true of such objects must be unsound.<sup>7</sup>

Despite this apparent rejection of the eternal, however, Kant in fact appropriates for his own purposes three traditional conceptions of the eternity: first, the notion of an eternal past as a past that has never been present; second, the notion of the sempiternal, that is, something that exists at every moment of time; and third, the notion of eternal as nontemporal.

First, a priori knowledge represents the form of an eternal past. Kant's critique of the rationalist attempt to gain synthetic a priori cognition of objects that transcend the possibility of experience is not a rejection of a priori cognition in general. A priori knowledge is also possible both of concepts (in analytic judgments) and of synthetic judgments. If metaphysical claims are those synthetic propositions that can be known a priori, then Kant by no means rejects all metaphysics. Rather, the aim of the critical philosophy is to limit synthetic knowledge a priori to a priori knowledge of the conditions of possibility of experience, what Kant terms "transcendental" conditions. As many commentators have pointed out, most insistently Heidegger, the "prior" of a priori is itself a temporal determination. But it is not an empirical temporal determination. The priority with which we know something a priori is not the priority of a past that could once have

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7 In particular, Kant thinks a particular form of the fallacy of equivocation causes the illicit inferences, what he calls a "subreption" (e.g. A402, Wood and Guyer translation, 442), in which a term equivocates between a transcendental and an empirical meaning.

been a present. If it were, then the knowledge would be a posteriori. What one might call “transcendental” temporality—one connected in the first instance with the temporality of our epistemic access to the transcendental—appears therefore to be that of an *eternal* past: not a past that extends eternally back through the sequence of presents, but a past that is *eternally* past. This eternal past resonates clearly with both ancient philosophy (it is the past that Socratic “recollection” refers to), and it anticipates some central problematics in the nineteenth century.

Second, Kant’s endeavor to identify synthetic a priori knowledge with the conditions of possibility of experience arguably commits him to a kind of sempiternity, since any such conditions represent aspects of experience that must obtain in every experience, hence at every temporal moment. This creates an internal conceptual connection between sempiternity and transcendental conditions.

Still, the connection is loose because Kant is methodologically wary about hypostatizing structural conditions of experience as existent features of that experience: this is one of the lessons of the Paralogisms. So there is general reason for being skeptical about the move from transcendental conditions, as claims that are sempiternally true by virtue of their structural role in the constitution of experience, to the actual existence of correspondingly sempiternal entities. Nevertheless, it might be possible to make out a case for this move, at least in the case of substance, and perhaps space.

On the face of it the case of space looks rather unpromising. Kant explicitly denies that “pure space and pure time” as “forms of intuition” are to be thought of as “themselves, objects that are intuited” (A291/B347).<sup>8</sup> So space appears to be a case in which forms—qua structural conditions of experience—are misinterpreted if viewed as objects within that very experience. But actually, at least in the case of space, the denial is likely motivated not by this structural consideration but

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<sup>8</sup> Wood and Guyer translation, 382.

by a more phenomenological argument that experiences are intrinsically (although only in part) conceptual. On this account, intuitions of space and time are unavailable experientially for the same reason that *all* intuitions are unavailable experientially, that is, because they are theoretical constructs: experience is always experience of intuitions qua “ingredients” in a conceptually mediated structure.<sup>9</sup> The unavailability of “bare,” unconceptualized intuitions, however, is clearly not intended to have the consequence that empty space is completely experientially unavailable. For if it were, it would be hard to see how Kant’s account of the synthetic a priori nature of Euclidean geometry—so crucial, at least pedagogically, to his case—would be possible. Rather, we reason about the structure of space in an intuition that constitutes an experience only by being conceptually mediated but that should still presumably be understood as an experience of space itself. Indeed, in the Aesthetic, Kant maintains explicitly that “space is represented as an infinite given magnitude” (B39).<sup>10</sup>

Kant is more stringent in his denial that time can be “perceived,” hence in his denial that it can be an object of experience (B225; B233),<sup>11</sup> because this premise plays an important role in the First and Second Analogies (which defend, respectively, a priori knowledge of substance and of the claim that every event has a cause) as well as in the Refutation of Idealism. But in the First Analogy it is the very fact that time *cannot* be perceived that necessitates a single substance within experience that *can* be. *Something* must persist in order for change to be possible, Kant argues. It is time itself that in fact so persists, it “lasts and does not change.” Hence it is just because time itself cannot be perceived, that

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9 John McDowell presents an extended version of this kind of view in his *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). Henry Allison interprets the “givenness” of space in a similar way in his *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*, rev. and enl. ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), 112–116. I borrow the word “ingredient” from Aquila’s phenomenological reading of Kant *Matter in Mind: A Study of Kant’s Transcendental Deduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

10 Wood and Guyer translation, 175.

11 Wood and Guyer translation, 300, 304.

we can infer the necessary existence of something within perception that “represents time in general” (B225).<sup>12</sup> This something is substance, which exists “at every time” (*was jederzeit ist*) (A182/B225),<sup>13</sup> exactly corresponding to the traditional notion of sempiternity.

Kant’s transcendental reasoning can therefore be understood as providing a new ground for understanding sempiternity. The very notion of a transcendental condition implies the existence of propositions true at every moment of time and, arguably underwrites at least some claims for existents that are present at every moment of time (*jederzeit*).

More significantly, although somewhat more controversially, Kant’s thought also bends the notion of nontemporality to its own ends. The very same argument by means of which Kant subjects the dialectical arguments of rationalist metaphysics and theology to critique also appears to authorize a strong conception of the nontemporal eternity of things. Transcendental conditions are conditions of experience, that is, of the way things must appear to us in order to be experienced as any kind of objects. We may *think* things as they may be in themselves independently of experience of them, but we cannot have any definite cognition of things in themselves: thoughts without intuitions are empty. But at the outset of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant makes a famous argument from the fact that time is a condition of the possibility of experience (for human beings) to the widely accepted claim that time is therefore a formal property of experience and then to the highly controversial view—which he takes to be definitive of his doctrine of transcendental idealism—that time is not a feature of things as they are in themselves (A19/B33).<sup>14</sup> If this argument is successful it appears to

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<sup>12</sup> Wood and Guyer translation, 300.

<sup>13</sup> Wood and Guyer translation, 300. Translation modified.

<sup>14</sup> Wood and Guyer translation, 155. Kant’s actual arguments are about space *and* time (with the latter often being word-for-word identical with the former). Many people (e.g. contemporary cognitive scientists) accept the claim that we have a priori representations of time and space; Kant’s further inference that things aside from our representation are not spatiotemporal was attacked most famously by Adolf Trendelenburg, who complained that Kant had “neglected” the “alternative” that time (and space) might be forms of human sensibility *and* a feature of things in themselves (even if we cannot know this). See Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*, 128–132, for one of many discussions.



legitimate some quite strong knowledge about things in themselves: that things in themselves are not temporal and hence are eternal.<sup>15</sup>

Whether this view can be reconciled with Kant's other claim that we can have no knowledge of things in themselves is debatable. But in a way Kant argues that it does not matter, for one of the most famous and influential conceptual moves associated with Kant is that even if eternal entities cannot be objects of cognition, we may still rationally believe in them because of their practical significance: they are conditions for the possibility of practical action (*Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:133).<sup>16</sup> This move underwrites a shift in the understanding of the concept of eternity in modern European thought that is broadly a kind of secularization. But by no means does this change suggest that the eternal is less important for modern thought. The opposite is true: by tying the eternal specifically to *practical* concerns, it has become a more important and urgent issue.

Such a transition of the concept of the eternal from the cosmological to the human scale is particularly visible in the Third Antinomy. The manifest content of the antinomy is the vindication of the possibility of human freedom: it answers the question of whether "causality in accordance with laws of nature" is the only kind of causality from which appearances can be derived, or whether "it is also necessary to assume another causality through freedom in order to explain them" (A444/B472).<sup>17</sup> As with the other antinomies, its resolution depends on an appropriate sensitivity

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15 There is much discussion in the Kant literature about whether this picture of Kant as committed to the existence of "two worlds" (one of which is populated with nontemporal objects) is really accurate and even more about whether it is defensible. For the purposes of reconstructing the history of the concept of eternity in Kant, however, I will take Kant at his word and presuppose the "two world" reading, in part because this reading was standard during the nineteenth century. Gerold Prauss's *Kant und das Problem der Dinge an sich* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1974) stands at the head of a significant strand of sympathetic contemporary reconstructions of Kant that deny the "two world" reading. Henry Allison, Kant's most prominent defender in the English-speaking world, also gives such a reading, in particular in his notion of "epistemic condition" in *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*.

16 *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. by Mary Gregor in *Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 133–271, here 246–247.

17 Wood and Guyer translation, 484.

to the distinction between transcendental and empirical application of terms. Empirically, everything that happens must do so in accordance with natural law.<sup>18</sup> But this is not, Kant argues, logically inconsistent with the claim that an empirical event might have “grounds” in an “intelligible cause” (A537/B565)<sup>19</sup> or “transcendental cause” (A546/B574)<sup>20</sup> as well.

What is striking about the antinomy is how little the formulations of the conflicting thesis and antithesis seem to have to do with this eventual goal. The proof of the thesis argues that to explain the occurrence of an event causally is, in accordance with the result of the Second Analogy, to postulate the existence of a prior event from which it follows according to a necessary law. If there are only natural causes, then this prior event, qua event, must itself be the necessary effect of some further natural cause. But, Kant argues, this means that the explanation of the first event cannot be complete if it refers merely to the prior event. Completeness would require an explanation of that prior event too. But since there is no end to the sequence of causes, there is no complete or, one might say, *sufficient*, explanation. But if nature is to be governed by laws, Kant argues, then “nothing happens without a cause *sufficiently* determined a priori” (A446/B474, my italics).<sup>21</sup> As a result, nature considered as a generalization of natural laws violates the basic principle of natural law, that everything that happens is sufficiently determined.<sup>22</sup> This is a contradiction. Hence there

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18 On Kant’s first *Critique* view, this follows from the claim established in the Second Analogy that every event must (as a condition of the possibility of experience) have a cause. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant appears to be more skeptical of the inference from (individual) necessary connection to natural laws (20:208–211, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), 13–15)

19 Wood and Guyer translation, 535.

20 Wood and Guyer translation, 539.

21 Wood and Guyer translation, 484.

22 Officially Kant regards the principle of sufficient reason as unprovable because transcendent (A782–94/B810–22, Wood and Guyer translation, 665–671). He nevertheless identifies causal explanation with this principle in the Second Analogy (A200–201/B246) because it has taken on a transcendental role as condition of possibility of experience and is hence restricted in its application to appearances. The argument of the Thesis of the Third Antinomy appears to turn precisely on an interpretation of the “sufficiency” of a reason or ground (*Grund*).

must be some other form of causality, and the only other option is causality through freedom.<sup>23</sup> The fact that this proof refers to the absence of any “completeness” in the series of causes, along with the definition of freedom as “an *absolute causal spontaneity beginning from itself*” (A446/B474),<sup>24</sup> suggests that Kant has in mind a divine type of freedom, that is, the freedom to initiate the whole causal series that makes up the entirety of the empirical world.

The cosmological reach of this argument renders it somewhat promiscuous. Since the distinction between appearances and things as they are in themselves is quite general, it therefore appears to follow that what can be said of a (possible) divine, intelligible, and nontemporal cause must in fact also be true of everything: every appearance is the appearance of something that possesses an intelligible—although cognitively inaccessible—character.<sup>25</sup> But what Kant is concerned about is the *special* case in which, as he makes clear in the Deduction (and the Paralogisms), the distinction between the way things appear to us and the way things are in themselves is reflexively applied to our own self-knowledge: thus inner sense “presents even ourselves to consciousness only as we appear to ourselves, not as we are in ourselves, since we intuit ourselves only as we are internally *affected*” (B152–153).<sup>26</sup> It is *this* application that forms the paradigm case of the crucial distinction between empirical and intelligible character: *my* empirical character constitutes the way *I* appear to myself, and *my* intelligible character is the way *I* am in myself (A5385–41/B566–569).<sup>27</sup> This distinction in turn is the basis for Kant’s claim that human beings are both subject to exceptionless causal laws (in their empirical characters) *and* yet may be metaphysically free and able (in some sense) to initiate

23 See Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*, 378.

24 Wood and Guyer translation, 484

25 Schopenhauer effectively endorses this claim. See below.

26 Wood and Guyer translation, 257

27 Wood and Guyer translation, 535–537

novel causal sequences by means of the freedom of their wills in a way analogous to the way god may be able to create the world.<sup>28</sup>

For Kant, the intelligible character of each human being must be understood nontemporally. He makes the following crucial inference: "Now this acting subject, in its intelligible character, would not stand under any conditions of time, for time is only the condition of appearances but not of things in themselves. In that subject no action would *arise* or *perish*" (A539–540/B567–568).<sup>29</sup> So, while in one way Kant is treating a special case (human beings) of *all* things, in another way the traditional understanding of god as nontemporal is, on the contrary, generalized to human beings.

The last clause of the foregoing quotation is, however, interestingly ambiguous: "in that subject no action would *arise* or *perish*." Taken by itself, it might mean that, qua temporally unconditioned, this subject is incapable of action, since action is plausibly interpreted as something intrinsically intratemporal, that is, involving arising and passing away. But of course this interpretation is belied both by the context (in which Kant is talking precisely about free actions) and by the description of the subject as "acting" in the first clause. The alternative interpretation is therefore to be preferred: the free intelligible subject is indeed capable of actions, but ones that do not arise or pass away: *eternal* (nontemporal) actions. And in this sense, Kant's conception of intelligible character appears to transfer another traditional attribute of god, this time the biblical god rather than the so-called god of the philosophers: namely that despite being nontemporal, god can still *act*, and is—at least in this—a *living* god.

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<sup>28</sup> Famously, Kant is not attempting to establish much more than the bare logical consistency of these two claims. Since he regards transcendental arguments as showing the truth of his view of empirical character, he does not strictly maintain much more than the bare logical possibility of the freedom of the intelligible character. I will often omit these caveats, partly for the sake of brevity and partly because commonly almost all the post-Kantians thought humans can gain substantive knowledge of things in themselves.

<sup>29</sup> Wood and Guyer translation, 536.

Kant's clearest attempt at reconciling intelligible freedom with the apparent causal determinism of the Second Analogy involves a carefully thought-out interpretation of this notion of a nontemporal act. Kant argues that the nontemporality condition on intelligible actions makes it impossible for any such action to have a causal antecedent: "in regard to the intelligible character . . . no *before* or *after* applies." The effects (not causal in a phenomenal sense) of such an action therefore emerges "from itself" (i.e., is not determined by anything else), but it does not constitute a *beginning*, since "beginning" is a temporal designation. Rather, every phenomenal act is the "immediate" effect of intelligible character. These intratemporal phenomenal acts are capable of beginning, but not absolutely, since as intratemporal, they must have precedent events to which they are, by the reasoning of the Second Analogy, causally related (A553–554/B481–282).<sup>30</sup> Thus the mistake of the Thesis of the Third Antinomy is to assert that there must be a faculty of "absolute causal spontaneity beginning from itself" (A446/B474).<sup>31</sup> Appropriate sensitivity to the transcendental/empirical distinction requires separating the absolute spontaneity of an intelligible cause that acts "from itself" from the intratemporal notion of beginning: the former is transcendental, while the latter is empirical.

Kant develops this idea of an eternal action most systematically in his late text *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793), where he gives an account of what he terms "radical evil." This term equivocates between two different senses. On the one hand evil is radical if it is so widely spread among human beings as to constitute something that appears to be "woven into human nature" (6:30)<sup>32</sup> On the other hand evil may be radical in the sense that it involves a *positive choice* of evil, rather than resulting from ignorance or being overcome by one's

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<sup>30</sup> Wood and Guyer translation, 543.

<sup>31</sup> Wood and Guyer translation, 484.

<sup>32</sup> *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, trans. and ed. by Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), 54.

passions or something similar. Understood in this second way, the text takes on the form of a defense against the objection that Kant's moral theory actually excludes the possibility of evil as a positive choice. Why might one make this objection? In the famous first section of the 1785 *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (4:393–406)<sup>33</sup> Kant presents a distinction between actions motivated by consciousness of the moral law and actions motivated by pathological incentives: interests and inclinations. Only actions motivated by the moral law are properly morally worthy. But if my action is pathologically motivated, then it does not stem from my rational will, and it does not seem that I can be responsible for it. Thus, so the objection runs, I only turn out responsible if my act was morally worthy. But then "evil" actions are merely those in which my rational will was (unfortunately) overrun by my passions, and I would be responsible for none of them—every evil act would be able to plead *crime passionnelle* in mitigation. Thus there would be no "radical" evil: if an act is consistent with the moral law, then I am responsible for it; if not, then this in itself is evidence that I was not choosing at the time and so I am not responsible for it.<sup>34</sup>

In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant tries to make it clear that we *can* choose evil: "only our own act is something that can be morally evil (that is, evil that can be imputed to us)" (6:31).<sup>35</sup> But this entails that it is not the mere fact that we are creatures with a sensibility—and hence capacity to be motivated by our own interests or inclinations—that lies at the bottom of radical evil. It may be that in immoral actions we act on the promptings of our sensibilities, our

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33 *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 7–18.

34 For instance, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant maintains that "recognition of the moral law is, however, consciousness of an activity of practical reason from objective grounds, which fails to express its effect in actions only because subjective (pathological) causes hinder it" (5:79, Mary Gregor translation, 204).

35 Wood and Di Giovanni translation, 35–36 (translation modified). Kant does not think we can choose evil *for evil's sake*; only devils can do that. Rather, radical evil turns on a subtler ordering of principles within our maxims for action: an evil act stems from a maxim that prioritizes pathological over rational incentives (6:36, Wood and Di Giovanni translation, 59).

interests and inclinations. But they cannot overcome us if the action is to be genuinely evil. Rather, we must *choose* to act on such pathological inclinations: people's power of choice "cannot be determined to action through any incentive *unless the incentive has been taken up into their maxim*" (6:23–24).<sup>36</sup>

There is an obvious tension between these two projects. If radical evil in the first sense really is "woven into human nature," then it is hard to see how it can be chosen. Kant argues that we have "propensities" to action, each of which constitutes "a subjective determining ground of the power of choice" and hence "*precedes all acts*" (6:31).<sup>37</sup> The question of whether evil is built into human nature therefore devolves onto the question whether we have a fundamental "propensity" to evil. But the tension is clear: if the propensity is "physical," then, even if it is part of human nature, we are not responsible for it, and it cannot ground any notion of *moral* evil; on the other hand if the supposed propensity originates in a free choice (of evil maxims in general), then it cannot actually be a propensity, since propensities are logically prior to acts, and a free choice must be an act. Kant grasps this dilemma and argues, following on from his discussion of the Third Antinomy, that we must distinguish "two meanings" of the word "act": an empirical sense and a transcendental sense. The latter sense is of an action that is "intelligible" and that "can be recognized only by means of reason, independently of any temporal conditioning" (6:31).<sup>38</sup>

The same tension is clearly evident in the idea of original sin: to the extent that it is "original," it cannot be our responsibility; to the extent

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<sup>36</sup> Wood and Di Giovanni translation, 49 (translation modified). Kant envisages a hierarchy of ever more general maxims culminating in an overarching maxim whose structure gives priority either to the moral law or to pathological incentives (6:21, Wood and Di Giovanni translation, 47).

<sup>37</sup> Wood and Di Giovanni translation, 55 (translation modified).

<sup>38</sup> Wood and Di Giovanni translation, 55 (translation modified). It is not obvious that this view is consistent with the *Critique of Pure Reason*. There an eternal action of intelligible spontaneity appeared to be a characteristic of *every* free action (which had both an empirical and a transcendental aspect); whereas in the *Religion* text, intelligible (eternal, nontemporal) acts are distinguished from ordinary everyday empirical acts as different kinds.

that it is our responsibility, it cannot be “original.” Kant’s resolution of this paradox depends precisely on the nontemporal nature of the act constituting the choice of fundamental maxim: “To have one or the other [good or an evil] disposition as an inborn constitution<sup>39</sup> does not here mean that it has not been acquired by the human being who harbors it, that this being is not the author of it, but rather, that it has not been acquired in time” (6:25).<sup>39</sup> An evil disposition is *acquired* all right—otherwise it wouldn’t be *evil*, that is, something for which the holder could be held responsible; but it is not acquired *in time*. Consequently, its phenomenal manifestation can only be as of something already there, something *inborn*.<sup>40</sup>

This metaphor of “inborn-ness” or “innateness” of evil integrates all three conceptions of the eternal at play in Kant, while refocusing the theological concept of the eternal on the individual moral agent. The result of an innate disposition to evil is that evil is present at every moment in human life. This corresponds to the eternal as present at each moment. But the explanation for this eternal presence is that evil is innate, that is, prior to the actual experience of any individual human being, constituting, from the point of view of the individual human life, an eternal past that was never present as such to any moment of human experience. This corresponds to the understanding of the eternal as an eternal past. And Kant’s explanation for the *moral* nature of this innate predisposition is that it is the result of an action taken by the human individual qua intelligible subject, hence an eternal nontemporal action. This nontemporal action corresponds to the understanding of the eternal as lacking any temporal predicates at all.

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<sup>39</sup> Wood and Di Giovanni translation, 50 (translation modified).

<sup>40</sup> One might argue that we are responsible in a quite ordinary way for at least some of our innate dispositions: those that we could eliminate (or eliminate easily) if we chose to. On Kant’s understanding of radical evil, however, dispositions only become morally relevant if we choose to act on them by incorporating them into our maxims. So the question is not the ancient (Aristotelian and rather empirical) question of the extent to which we can be responsible for our dispositions but, rather, the more perplexing question of how we can be said to have chosen something (our most basic maxim) that appears to be prior to any act and hence a part of our natural constitution.



Schelling and Kierkegaard both extend the basic impetus of Kant's thought, treating eternity not primarily as a way of describing the distinctive temporality of god but rather as a way of understanding certain key aspects of human existence. Despite the profound roots of both of Schelling and Kierkegaard in Christian thought, this displacement of the conception of eternity onto a notion of human freedom and self-definition marks a quite radical change. But before addressing these developments, it is important to situate them in the context of the dominant figure of philosophy in the first half of the nineteenth century, Hegel.

## 2 HEGEL

Hegel does not talk much about eternity. Indeed the standard view is that Hegel is primarily responsible for making the nineteenth century the "historical" century, dipping everything, including philosophical thought itself, in the universal solvent of time. At the end of his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), for instance, Hegel identifies philosophical conceptuality with time itself, claiming that "*time* is the *existence* of the *concept* itself."<sup>41</sup> While this comment is a little opaque, it certainly suggests a radical attempt to immerse philosophical thought in time, an attempt that looks highly inimical to the development of any concept of eternity at all. Such interpretations lend credence to the view that the famous developmental structures of Hegelian thought represent historicized versions of Kant's categories, plunging concepts into time and history. On this reading there would be no stable transcendental forms to nonhistorically (and hence nontemporally) condition the possibility of finite human experience so as to be in some

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41 "Die *Zeit* ist der *Begriff* selbst, der *da ist*." Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Sämtliche Werke*, Jubilee edition in 20 vols., ed. Hermann Glockner (Stuttgart: Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Fromann Verlag, 1964), vol. 2 (*Phänomenologie des Geistes*), 612; trans. A. V. Miller as *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), sec. 801, p. 487. Translation modified. Further references to Hegel in the text will be by standard/English title, section number (if appropriate), and volume and page number of the *Werke*.

sense present with every moment of it, and there would be no eternal past out of which the “a priori” forms could be recollected.

Hegel’s dialectic is clearly more complicated than a simple temporalization of Kant’s categories, but the most obvious direction in which this simple reading needs complicating ends up making the dialectic inconsistent with the nontemporality of the intelligible character of things. The sequences of “shapes” of consciousness that Hegel’s works follow are not simply a sequence of temporalized forms of experience. Rather they constitute a sequence that develops so as to include among its forms the very notion of experience as something that divides into form and content: each shape of consciousness “posits” content appropriate for it. This form and content pair appropriate to a given shape come into conflict (“contradiction”), driving the search for a more satisfying shape. But what consciousness ultimately realizes is that in all these shapes it was itself that it was (mis)recognizing: consciousness attains absolute knowledge when it recognizes that its consciousness of an other is an alienated form of its own self-consciousness. But if this is correct, then the distinction between appearances and things in themselves, which grounds Kant’s understanding of the nontemporal nature of things in themselves, cannot be supported: the very distinction between how things appear and how they might be in themselves is itself temporalized, dissolved in the universal acid of Hegel’s historicization of the concept.

But perhaps this complete victory of time over eternity is not the end of the story, for the terms “historicization” and “temporalization” imply a process that starts in a nontemporal place and ends up in a temporal one. Perhaps Hegel does have some positive understanding of eternity. Indeed the slogan from the end of the *Phenomenology* quoted above suggests just this, for it could be more literally translated: “the concept is time, as it is there or exists [da ist].” Here “is” should be understood not as the “is” of logical identity but as Hegel’s speculative identity. The (nontemporal) concept posits the temporal as its alienated other so as to achieve a properly mediated self-consciousness. This means Hegel assumes a nontemporal starting point. Indeed, such is

the nub of Heidegger's critique of Hegel at the end of *Being and Time*, where he takes Hegel to task for claiming that "the development of history falls into time" on exactly the grounds that it thinks of spirit/mind (*Geist*) as something nontemporal, such that it can "fall into" or "happen" in time, rather than as a deeper and more "authentic" experience of time itself.<sup>42</sup>

Hegel does not exploit this idea of the fall of spirit/mind into time in the *History* text. But he returns to something similar in the *Philosophy of Nature*. Unlike the *Phenomenology*, which starts with, and presupposes, an elementary form of human consciousness, the *Philosophy of Nature* starts, according to Hegel, where the *Science of Logic* finished, with an internally articulated, speculatively developed concept, or what Hegel calls an "Idea," something that he sometimes identifies with god. Here the Ideas with which the *Logic* terminates posit the whole of (material) nature as their antithesis. Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* then takes the form of a speculative recovery of material nature for the Idea: "alienated from the Idea, nature is the mere corpse of understanding. Nature is the Idea, but only in itself; this is why Schelling described it as a 'petrified intelligence' and others have even described it as 'frozen.' God, however, does not remain dead and petrified, and the stones cry out and raise themselves up to spirit" (sec. 247 Addition/9:50).<sup>43</sup>

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42 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, sec. 82, with the citation from Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* on p. 480.

43 *Philosophy of Nature*, ed. and trans. M. J. Petry, 3 vols. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970), 1:206, translation modified. This kind of "metaphysical" reading of Hegel was standard in nineteenth-century Germany and indeed remained dominant up to the British Hegelian tradition. It is much less common now, with contemporary interpreters like Robert Pippin in his *Hegel's Idealism: Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) emphasizing continuity with Kant and treating the dialectic as a conceptual affair, albeit one complicated by the fact that what concepts are concepts *of* is also itself taken up conceptually, so that Hegel's move beyond Kant is akin to Sellars's critique of the "myth of the given," (see Sellars's 1956 "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," reprinted in *Science, Perception and Reality* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963]). I take the metaphysical reading both because it is historically appropriate and because it gives a clear sense to Hegel's understanding of the eternal, which he elaborates in the context of a philosophy of nature that has been very resistant to interpretation in nonmetaphysical terms, although for an exception see Alison Stone, *Petrified Intelligence: Nature in Hegel's Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

This speculative identity (and hence dialectical transition) is not quite the same as that between the concept and time, but it is closely related. In the *Nature* text, Hegel argues not just that space is the form of exteriority in general, but also the converse, that nature must be spatial in order for it to constitute the externality of the Idea to itself. Time in turn emerges as the speculative solution to the contradictions embodied by space. So one would expect that the Idea itself must be eternal in the sense of nontemporal, and indeed Hegel goes on to describe the “eternal unity of the Idea” (sec. 247 Addition/9:49).<sup>44</sup> But what kind of eternity does Hegel attribute to the Ideas? He answers this question by again following Kant quite closely: the early sections of the *Nature* text take their inspiration from Kant’s Antinomies by raising the question of the “eternity of the world” (sec. 247 Addition/9:51, 52).<sup>45</sup> Concerning the eternity of the world, Hegel again follows Kant in thinking that the question is poorly posed, but he has a different aim in mind from Kant’s. For Kant the question of the eternity of the world is poorly posed because the world is neither infinitely extended in time nor merely finitely extended but is endless: the totality of the series of conditions is not given (*gegeben*) as such but is set for us as a task (*uns aufgegeben*) (A497–498/B526).<sup>46</sup> For Hegel, the question of the eternity of the world is poorly posed because it inhibits the development of a proper conception of the eternal by identifying the eternal with the sempiternal. The world, on the view that Hegel rejects, would turn out to be eternal just if it had no temporal beginning, that is, if time were unending: “the question of the eternity of the world,” Hegel writes, concerns “a representation of time, an eternity as it is called, an infinitely long period of time, such that the world has had no beginning in time.” But mere unendingness of time fails to articulate a proper notion of eternity for

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44 Petry translation, 1:205.

45 Petry translation, 1:206, 207.

46 Guyer and Wood translation, 514.

Hegel: “infinite time, if it is still represented as time and not as time sublated [aufgehoben], is still to be distinguished from eternity” (sec. 247 Addition/9:52).<sup>47</sup>

One would therefore expect that Hegel would endorse a nontemporal conception of eternity in which all temporal predicates are removed. And this appears to be the case: he describes eternity as “absolute timelessness” while he is in the process of delineating it clearly from any conception of duration (sec. 258 Addition/9:81–82).<sup>48</sup> He explicitly refuses both the notion of an eternal past and its correlate, a messianic eternal future: “eternity is not before or after time, it is not prior to the creation of the world, nor is it when the world disappears” (sec. 247 Addition/9:52).<sup>49</sup> To entertain such conceptions of eternity would be to “make eternity into a moment of time” (sec. 258 Remark/9:80).<sup>50</sup> A correct conception of eternity needs to be purified of all temporal determinations to achieve complete nontemporality. And this task is perhaps not as easy as it seems.

Hegel’s interpretation is therefore similar to—but more sophisticated than—Kant’s conception of the nontemporal eternal, with the crucial exception that for Kant nontemporal things are cognitively inaccessible. For Kant, nontemporality only achieves significance in relation to practical concerns, that is, in relation to freedom. For Hegel such a limitation does not appear. Hegel wants to heal the dualisms of Kant’s thought precisely by using cognition to overstep the bounds of possible experience. Hegel broaches the eternal in a solidly theoretical context (the philosophy of nature), and even in his local references to Kant he chooses to position his views in relation to the first two, theoretical, antinomies rather than the third, which opens up the way to a practical significance for eternity. “Philosophy” itself, Hegel writes, “is the timeless conceptualization [Begreifen] of both time,

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47 Petry translation, 1:207 (modified).

48 Petry translation, 1:231.

49 Petry translation, 1:207 (modified).

50 Petry translation, 1:213 (modified).

and everything else, according to its eternal determination" (sec. 247 Addition/9:52).<sup>51</sup>

This is important to bear in mind before bringing up a final aspect of Hegel's conception of the eternal, for this difference—between a conception of the eternal as of primarily cognitive or primarily practical significance—is crucial for understanding the way Schelling ends up departing from Hegel. The final aspect of Hegel's view (also similar to Kant's conception of the nontemporal eternal) is that the eternal is bound up with a kind of nontemporal act of creation. The persistent identification of the Ideas with god as well as the overall structure of the relation between the *Logic* and the *Philosophy of Nature* suggests that Hegel's account of the eternal at the beginning of the latter text is part of an account of the creation of the world. If it is true that Hegel is describing the creation, then the fact that the Ideas are eternal and that they create the world appears to entail an eternal act of creation. Indeed, Hegel infers directly from his account of nontemporal eternity that "the world is created, is now being created, and has always been created" (sec. 247 Addition/9:52).<sup>52</sup>

Two things are striking about Hegel's view. First, this nontemporal act is not directly connected with individual practical action as it is in Kant: although Hegel elsewhere devotes much attention to the problematic of freedom, he does not think of freedom in nontemporal terms, except possibly in this case of the creation of the world. But it is not obvious that this eternal act by means of which the Ideas posit nature is in fact free. These issues will be central to Schelling's account of the eternal and his eventual break with Hegel's thought. Second,

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<sup>51</sup> Petry translation, 1:207 (modified).

<sup>52</sup> Petry translation, 1:207. Stephen Houlgate in "Schelling's Critique of Hegel's Science of Logic," *Review of Metaphysics* 53 (1999): 99–128, takes specific issue with this "metaphysical" reading of the transition from the *Logic* to the *Philosophy of Nature* (118). But in *Petrified Intelligence*, Alison Stone refers to this notion of a nontemporal act (66) as a way of rescuing Hegel's philosophy of nature from its metaphysical interpretation: since the creation of the world takes place nontemporally, there is no "linear" sequence from logic to nature, so that the developmental order of the dialectic does not have to be identified with the chronological order of the events of nature.

despite Hegel's rejection of the notion of an eternal past (future) on the basis that such conceptions have not achieved complete conceptual liberation from temporal determination, Hegel nevertheless thinks of the eternal as an eternal present: immediately after rejecting the eternal past and future, Hegel goes on to say the eternal "is absolute present, the now without before or after" (sec. 247 Addition/9:52).<sup>53</sup> Kierkegaard will take strong issue with this claim.

### 3 SCHELLING

Schelling's middle period works (from 1809 to about 1815) contain his most original accounts of the eternal: in particular the 1809 essay *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Nature of Human Freedom* (known as the *Freedom* essay) and the three fragments (from 1811, 1813, and 1815) of the *Weltalter* (*The Ages of the World*).<sup>54</sup>

In the *Freedom* essay Schelling identifies the "human essence" with Kant's intelligible cause;<sup>55</sup> he then goes on to describe it in the following terms, clearly echoing Kant and reinforcing the importance of a parallel between human freedom and divine creation:

The essence of the human being is essentially *his own act*. . . . In the original creation a human being is . . . an undecided essence . . . [and] only the being itself can decide itself. But this decision cannot occur in time; it occurs outside of all time and hence occurs together with the original creation (although as an act different from it). . . . The

<sup>53</sup> Petry translation, 1:207 (modified).

<sup>54</sup> References to the *Freedom* essay will be to the pagination of vol. 7 of *Schellings Werke*, 12 vols., ed. M. Schröter (Munich: Beck, 1927–59), and then to the pagination of *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006). References to the *Ages of the World* will be to the pagination of the German text of the second draft in *Die Weltalter: Fragmente in den Urauffassungen von 1811 und 1813*, ed. M. Schröter (Munich: Biederstien, 1946), and then to the translation by Judith Norman in Žižek/Schelling, *The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the World* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997). I use the abbreviations *Freedom* and *Ages*.

<sup>55</sup> "Das intelligible Wesen" (383/49).

act by means of which the human being's life is determined in time does not itself belong to time but rather to eternity: nor does this act precede life temporally, rather it goes through time (unmoved by it) as an act that is by its nature eternal. (*Freedom*, 385–386/51)<sup>56</sup>

Schelling establishes this conclusion through an analysis of the phenomenon of agency, arguing that both metaphysical determinism *and* metaphysical indeterminism are inconsistent with our understanding of free action.<sup>57</sup> Indeterminism is not consistent with agency because if it were true, we would be like Buridan's ass, able to act only on the basis of randomness, not agency. But if determinism were true, we would be moved by external causes, which is also inconsistent with our agency (*Freedom*, 382–383/48–49).<sup>58</sup>

Schelling thinks that only one view is consistent with our understanding of our own agency: human beings determine their own essences or intelligible characters in a nontemporal act. In this case, the transcendental decision is groundless, but our individual acts flow from the choice of character made in that original decision and hence have grounds; conversely, although our individual acts are determined by the combination of character and circumstance, we are still responsible for them because our character is our choice. For Schelling, the act of character choice can only fulfill these requirements if it is nontemporal. And this puts it—us—on a par with god: our individual acts of character-formation take place “together with” the “original creation,” although they are acts, “different from it”. Equally, Schelling uses the same Kantian arguments in defense of a rationalized version

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<sup>56</sup> Translation modified.

<sup>57</sup> Peter Van Inwagen's “How to Think about Free Will,” *Journal of Ethics* 12 (2008): 327–341, makes a similar claim.

<sup>58</sup> *Freedom*, 382–383/48–50). Indeed, in the *Ages of the World*, Schelling goes so far as to claim that there would no dimensions of time under determinism: “If, as a few supposed sages have claimed, the world were a chain of causes and effects which ran backwards and forwards to infinity, then there would in truth be neither past nor future. But this nonsensical thought should rightly have vanished along with the mechanistic system to which alone it belongs” (*Ages*, 24/120).



of “original sin” (*ursprüngliche Sünde*) and “radical evil” (*Freedom*, 388/53). Both are explained by a nontemporal choice whose intrusion into the temporal world can only be experienced in terms of chronological priority: original sin is radical because it appears as prior to our first temporal choice yet is also evil because it is something (bad) that we are responsible for.

But Schelling does depart in significant ways from Kant, ways that prompt him to give a much richer account of nontemporal eternity and its relation to the temporal. This departure goes back to Kant’s *Religion with the Boundaries of Mere Reason* and effectively drives a wedge between the two senses of “radical” evil: original sin and evil as a choice. Recall that this text is, in part, Kant’s response to the complaint that immoral actions turn out not be actions at all, so that we can only choose the good. The hierarchy of maxims Kant envisages in the *Religion* text is intended to head this danger off: on this view, what makes my act wrong is not that I was in fact overrun by pathological incentives but that my action was governed by a maxim according to which I explicitly chose to act in accordance with such incentives. It is unclear that this solution will work, however, since, for Kant, a nontemporal decision would be made precisely by a person qua purely intelligible, and it is hard to see how this decision could issue in anything other than a rational maxim, which Kant identifies with moral action. This criticism was leveled at Kant at the time, for instance by Carl Schmid in his 1790 *Attempt at a Moral Philosophy*: Kant’s theory rescues us from the frying pan of phenomenal causal determinism but only to land us in the fire of what he picturesquely termed an “intelligible fatalism.”<sup>59</sup>

So both determinism and its denial are inconsistent with agency at the temporal and phenomenal level. Agency must therefore be understood nontemporally. But to conceive the nontemporal realm as

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59 C. C. E. Schmid, *Versuch einer Moralphilosophie* (Jena: Cröker, 1790), cited in Michelle Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling and Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 50–52.

intrinsically rational is equally inconsistent with agency, if freedom is understood properly as a “capacity for good and evil,” as the *Freedom* essay claims (*Freedom*, 352/23). As a result, Schelling infers that the nontemporal realm cannot be strictly identified with pure rationality and complete intelligibility: it must possess an opacity, a resistance to the full light of the intellect. This conviction has several important repercussions. First and most obviously, it yields a quite different understanding of the eternal act that constitutes the character of each individual from Kant’s act of rational self-determination. Second, Schelling thinks of the acts of individual (self)-creation as coeval with god’s act of creation, so that his accounts of the two reflect each other. The same arguments that motivate him to deduce an original opacity in human (eternal) action therefore also compel him to suggest the same for god: god’s freedom to create requires an “irreducible remainder that cannot be resolved into reason by the greatest exertion, but always remains in the depths” (*Freedom*, 360/29).<sup>60</sup> And, in the *Ages of the World* fragments at least, Schelling goes so far as to think of god as self-creating in the same way that human beings’ nontemporal decisions are self-creating.

We can see what is distinctive about Schelling’s notion of the eternal act of divine (and human self-creation) by looking at the details as Schelling presents them in the *Ages of the World* text.<sup>61</sup> Schelling begins his account in eternity, describing a set of forces constituting the dynamism of god’s eternal nature. These forces of primal nature are in a dynamic tension that he presents as at a sort of impasse: a contractive force acts as a negative drawing-in while an expansive force acts positively, pushing things out, and their “spiritual” synthesis is itself undone by the initially contractive force in a cycle that, being eternal, can never come to an end or give rise to anything else.

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<sup>60</sup> Translation modified.

<sup>61</sup> This analysis draws in part on Alistair Welchman and Judith Norman, “Creating the Past: Schelling’s *Ages of the World*,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 4 (2010): 23–43.

As Judith Norman and I have glossed it: "The forces want to be recognized as god's own nature, which is to say: collectively posited as the eternal ground of god. These different elements (primal nature and the godhead) are, strictly speaking, both aspects of god, so the longing is really god longing for himself, for his own existence."<sup>62</sup>

So god longs to exist—to create himself. But, as Schelling repeatedly insists toward the end of the *Ages of the World*: "how is a decision [whether or not to exist] possible here?" (*Ages*, 119, 120 [twice], 124/171, 172 [twice], 174). Any mode of decision-making is apparently going to be either necessary or arbitrary, and in neither case free. Here Schelling takes a quite standard definition of freedom as the "ability to be something along with the ability to not-be it" (*Ages*, 45/132),<sup>63</sup> that is, as what he describes as an "indifference" between two positions. But he gives a quite radical interpretation of this position: any decision will hamper god's freedom, because if god comes down definitively on one side or another, he will no longer possess freedom qua indifference between the two. So god cannot both decide to exist (or not exist) and retain his freedom.<sup>64</sup>

Therefore, in order to retain his freedom, god must decide both to exist *and* not exist. But this is clearly a contradiction.<sup>65</sup> Schelling adopts a big guns approach here, and rather than resolving the contradiction he appeals to the clause in the traditional formulation of the principle of noncontradiction that stipulates that a thing cannot

<sup>62</sup> Welchman and Norman, "Creating the Past," 34.

<sup>63</sup> In this passage Schelling argues that only a will can have this property of freedom, since a will is "something that can or can refuse to actualize itself, whereas everything else is simply either actual or possible.

<sup>64</sup> Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber, 1963) has an image of freedom that expresses this Schellingian view: the protagonist dreams of her possible choices as ripe figs on a tree, but when she picks one of the figs, all the others die (chap. 7).

<sup>65</sup> Schelling claims that existence (life) is contradiction but that the eternal cannot be contradictory. So there is a contradiction between the nature of the eternal and the nature of existence. But there is also a contradiction between the negation of being and eternity. Being has two forms in this text: *Seyn* (Norman trans.: "being") and *Seyende* (Norman trans.: "what-is"). If eternity cannot possess either of the two forms, then it must be either *Nichtseyende* or a contingent being. But both of these are false. So there is another contradiction here. Elsewhere in the *Ages of the World* (*Ages*, 33/125), Schelling identifies a contradiction between what-is and being themselves.

have contradictory predicates “at the same time” (*Ages*, 122/173). This is the kernel of Schelling’s answer: the only way of resolving the contradiction is by spreading the *prima facie* contradictory predicates out *over time*. In eternity, there is no time. So the only way an eternal god can make a decision regarding his existence *and* preserve his freedom is by creating time,<sup>66</sup> and by projecting the division in his willing onto the dimensions of time. Specifically, the decision not to exist belongs to the past (is, in a sense, definitive of the past), and the decision to exist belongs to the present. God now (but only now) exists. The disjunction of the decision defines the dimensions of time.

However, the time that is thereby created cannot immediately be identified with empirical “clock” time. God’s decisive act here is also the consummation of god’s own act of self-creation (*Ages*, 122/172–173). So when god pushes his nature back out into the past, creating the dimensions of time in the process, the past into which god pushes his own nature does not preexist the act of pushing it back. This act did not take place in a present moment that then moved temporally into the past: there “was” no such present moment when the act took/takes place—the act is eternal. Nevertheless, the act is *posited* as past; god’s nature is now his ground. This past is therefore a past with which no present moment has ever coincided—an eternal past. And this is just the kind of eternal past that is at issue both in the ancient Socratic doctrine of recollection and implicitly in the Kantian doctrine of the synthetic a priori.

But Schelling’s account is quite distinct from these doctrines, and in it our relation to this eternal past is quite different from Socrates’s. For Socrates, the eternal past is, as it were, already there. So all Meno’s servant has to do, in the famous scene from the *Meno* (82b–85b), is immerse himself in it in order to recall what he has forgotten. But for

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<sup>66</sup> Schelling’s theory is really more involved than this. In the passage cited, he actually rejects Aristotle’s formulation, introducing his own notion of “potencies”; but then he goes on to argue that these potencies in fact constitute time.

Schelling we are ourselves akin to god in our need to *create* a past. At the end of the *Ages of the World*, Schelling applies the lessons learned from his account of the theology—indeed in this case theogony—of creation to the human individuals whose self-creative acts are coordinated with god's:

The man who cannot separate himself from himself, who cannot break loose from everything that happens to him and actively oppose it—such a man has no past, or more likely he never emerges from it, but lives in it continually. It is advantageous and beneficial for a man to be conscious of having put something behind himself, as it were—that is, of having posited it as past. . . . Only the man with the strength to raise himself above himself is able to create a true past for himself; he alone can savor a true present, just as he alone looks forward to a genuine future. (*Ages*, 23–4/120)

We see here the fulfillment of the suggestion Schelling made in the *Freedom* essay, that the human act of self-creation is a recapitulation of the divine act, including the creation of (a personal conception) of time. And there is another way Schelling draws out the consequences of the view that human beings create themselves in a way analogous to the way god does:

When we speak about the character of a man, we have in mind his distinctiveness, the particularity of what he does and who he is, which is given to him through the expressing of his essence. Men who hesitate to be wholly one thing or another are called characterless; but men are said to have character if they reveal a determinate expressing of their whole essence. Nevertheless, it is a well-known fact that nobody can be given character, and that nobody has chosen for himself the particular character he bears. There is neither deliberation nor choice here, and yet everyone recognizes and judges character as an eternal (never-ceasing, constant) deed, and

attributes to a man both it as well as the action that follows from it. Universal moral judgment thus acknowledges that every man has a freedom in which there is neither (explicit) deliberation nor choice, a freedom which is itself fate and necessity. But most men shy away from this freedom which opens like an abyss before them, just as | they are frightened when faced with the necessity of being wholly one thing or another. They shy away from this as they shy away from everything coming from that inexpressible; and where they see a ray cast by it they turn away as if it were a flash of lightning that brings harm to everything in its way. They feel themselves crushed by this freedom, as by an appearance from an incomprehensible world, from eternity. (*Ages*, 127–128/175–176)

This passage claims that human beings not only may choose their (“intelligible”) characters but also may remain “characterless,” an act (or omission) apparently comparable to god’s choice not to exist: they can remain in the state described in the *Freedom* essay as “undecided” but still have an empirical existence in time, but an existence without essence: “characterless,” as the *Ages of the World* text has it, a paradoxical choice not to choose.

For Schelling, therefore, the eternal enters twice into human actions: to make a true beginning, to perform a free and unconditioned act, what has gone before must be pushed into an eternal past; on the other hand such an act, in connecting individuals with the eternal acts that constitute their characters, threatens to crush individuals under the weight of the eternal. But these claims are quite paradoxical, for if the act of beginning occurs outside time, then there is no sense in which my phenomenal actions are being addressed. The beginning has always already happened in eternity; I cannot now (at some point in time) make it. Similarly, there is no sense in which I can now be oppressed by the weight of eternity into failing to make an eternal choice of character, since that choice (or failure of choice) has

always already been made.<sup>67</sup> It seems that Schelling raises a kind of existential question of eternity: how are we to orient ourselves to the nontemporal? But by locating free human action in the nontemporal realm, he makes it impossible to answer. This is just the point at which Kierkegaard intervenes.

#### 4 SCHOPENHAUER

Before tackling Kierkegaard, however, a brief note on Schopenhauer is in order. Schopenhauer is probably the philosopher who most radically develops the idea that the in-itself of things is a nontemporal action. But he does so in a way that departs from the dominant practical orientation in Kant and Schelling, an orientation that is then taken up again in Kierkegaard. This is because Schopenhauer does not believe practical, that is, normative, philosophy to be possible at all: philosophy, he claims, “can never do more than interpret and explain what there is” (2:320/298).<sup>68</sup>

Rather than radicalizing the (moral) depth of Kant’s conception of an eternal act, Schopenhauer broadens its scope. He essentially accepts Kant’s transcendental idealism in his 1819 masterwork *The World as Will and Representation*: Kant’s phenomenal world is Schopenhauer’s world as representation. But Schopenhauer then adds to the world as representation the claim that it is possible to gain some kind of cognitive and theoretical (as opposed to practical) access to the in-itself of things. This in-itself is what Schopenhauer terms *will*. It is a much

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67 Schelling is more consistent in some ways than Kant here, since in the *Freedom* essay he insists that conversion (i.e. a radical case of making a new beginning) is impossible since it is merely the working-out of something that was “already in” the original act of self-creation (*Freedom*, 389/54) and emphasizes that phenomenal actions are completely determined (386/51).

68 References to Schopenhauer are to volume and page number of the *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Arthur Hübscher, 4th ed. (Wiesbaden: Brockhaus, 1988), 7 vols., and then to *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. and ed. Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

wider category than human will: Schopenhauer's will is an endless striving without goal or purpose that is manifest in every phenomenon from inanimate matter under the force of gravitational attraction to animals under the dominion of instinctual actions. Human beings are included, but what is special about them is merely that they are capable of being occasioned to action by abstract representations.

Schopenhauer's arguments are often snappier than Kant's, but they definitely have a Kantian inspiration. For instance, having identified the striving will as the in-itself, he quickly infers that it must be "endless" because, as the in-itself, the will is not subject to the transcendental form of time; this nontemporal "eternal becoming" can have no purpose, and thus it is with human life: we strive, but there is nothing ultimately to strive for (2:195–196/188–189). But Schopenhauer probably retains more of the machinery of Kant's system than he is entitled to. For one thing, he tries to take over Kant's distinction between intelligible and empirical character (2:127/131), which he uses to ground Kantian-sounding (and Schellingian-sounding) claims that ground moral responsibility not in empirical choices (for we are empirically determined and do not make any) but in a single nontemporal choice that results in our (empirically unalterable) character (2:188–189/183). But the term "intelligible" is hardly appropriate for Schopenhauer's view of the in-itself of things, which is shorn of rationality and even consciousness. And, more pressingly, he persistently identifies the combination of space and time as the conditions of individuation, calling them the *principium individuationis* (2:134/137), which evidently implies that the will as such cannot be individuated: neither unity nor multiplicity can belong to it (2:134/138). But then there is no room for the *personal* nature of responsibility: the will as such is free (from determination by the principle of sufficient reason); but in being so it is no longer my individual will.

It is not clear that Schopenhauer ever solves this difficulty, and it does seem that the way he deploys the notion of a nontemporal act, of the will, purchases breadth at the expense of moral depth. To return to that morally deeper thread, I will now consider Kierkegaard.



## 5 KIERKEGAARD

Kierkegaard is the first of the thinkers I am considering to take seriously the problem of how to make contact with eternity *in time*. He addresses this issue in *Philosophical Fragments* and in *The Concept of Anxiety*, where he notes the philosophical deficiencies of earlier attempts to address this problem, explicitly those of Hegel and Socrates; but Schelling, whose lectures he had heard in Berlin, remains in the background.<sup>69</sup>

The notion of a (free, pivotal, defining, moral) *decision* is as critical for Kierkegaard as it is for Kant and Schelling. But for Kierkegaard the decision is *not* eternal, it is a *temporal* decision that is distinguished by the fact that it makes contact with the eternal. Indeed, Kierkegaard argues that to fail to understand how the eternal is embedded in time is to fail to account for the fact that a temporal instant can be imbued with what he terms “decisive significance” as an individual moment (*Fragments*, 4:183/13), leading to a new person and a clear break from one’s past.

The problem with the Socratic conception of eternity is that it fails to account for the significance of the moment. Kierkegaard’s argument for this in the *Philosophical Fragments* has the form of a *modus tollens*: if one adopts a Socratic perspective on the attainment of truth, then no conception of the decisive moment can be formed. But there are decisive moments, so the Socratic perspective must be wrong (*Fragments*, 4:183/13). How is it wrong? On the Socratic view, Kierkegaard argues, using the theory of learning elaborated in the *Meno*, the “follower” (i.e., the student, Meno’s servant in the dialogue)

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69 References will be to the volume and page of *Søren Kierkegaards Samlede Værker*, vols. 1–14, ed. A. B. Drachmann, J. L. Heiberg, and H. O. Lange (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1962), and then to the page numbers of the following English translations: *Johannes Climacus: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985); *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte in collaboration with Albert B. Anderson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), and *Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968). The titles are abbreviated to *Fragments*, *Anxiety*, and *Postscript*.

is shown by the teacher *to have already known* what the teacher purports to teach. It is for this reason that Socrates refers to himself as a “midwife” (*Fragments*, 4:180/10). If Socrates’s theory is correct, then it will *always* be the case that the follower *already* knows, and, as already mentioned, Socrates’s theory of recollection pioneers a conception of eternity as an eternal past in the sense that its contents can never have been present. As a result, Kierkegaard argues, the moment of midwifery, when the servant realizes that he already knew what Socrates was trying to teach him, is “indifferent”. This moment cannot, for Kierkegaard, be significant, since the result is the realization that something had been the case all along. “Viewed Socratically,” Kierkegaard writes, “any point of departure in time is *eo ipso* something accidental, a vanishing point, an occasion” (*Fragments*, 4:181/11), and “in the same moment I discover that I have known the truth from eternity without knowing it, in the same instant that moment is hidden in the eternal” (*Fragments*, 4:183/13).

As I have shown, the Socratic conception of an eternal past can be detected (although in a subjective form) in Kant’s understanding of the a priori. And it is decisively modified by Schelling, for whom the eternal past is not a reservoir of content to be tapped but a positive achievement of creative willing, the condition for making a decisive beginning, both for god and for the human individual. Although in many ways Schelling is aiming to understand how a beginning—a decision—is possible, he botches the task, on Kierkegaard’s analysis, by locating the decision itself in eternity, as the act of choice of “intelligible” character. As with Socrates, the “moment is hidden in the eternal.” For the decision to have any significance, Kierkegaard believes, it must be temporal. In some ways, therefore, Schelling’s theory is even worse than Socrates’s.

If the Socratic/Schellingian notion of an eternal past “loses” the moment, Hegel’s attempt to theorize eternity on the basis of the present fares no better, according to Kierkegaard. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard claims that the instant as a durationless temporal

point leads Hegel in particular to incorrectly identify the instant with eternity in the notion of the *eternal present* (*Anxiety*, 4:354 note/84 note). Kierkegaard argues that Hegel's durationless temporal point is just as "indifferent" as the Socratic instant, albeit for different reasons. Kierkegaard's objection to Hegel's speculative identification of the temporal moment with the eternal is an instance of a more general objection he has to Hegel's thought, that the individual or the particular cannot (as Hegel believes) be dialectically "preserved" in the absolute or universal but will rather be (undialectically) lost altogether in it. But where the indifference of Socrates's instant leads to a misconstrual of the eternal as something eternally *past*, Hegel's parallel misconstrual is of the eternal as eternally *present*.

It is tempting to see these two notions of the (Socratic) eternal past and the (Hegelian) eternal present as unstable transitional forms in the thinking of eternity: they are positioned precariously between a sempiternal understanding of eternity, which is unambiguously still a form of temporality, and a fully nontemporal conception of eternity. On this interpretation, the eternal past and eternal present are conceptions of the eternal that *partly* violate the normal conditions of the passage of time: what is eternally past has always been past and is therefore not something that was once present and has become past; similarly, the eternal present is always present and was never in the past, nor will it ever someday be in the future. Thus Kierkegaard's objection is, in part, that the modification of the eternal by temporal predicates ("past," "present") represents a failure to think the eternal properly, that is, completely nontemporally.<sup>70</sup> And in the absence of a proper understanding of eternity, it is not possible to see how to synthesize it with time and thereby account for the "moment" imbued with significance that represents a genuine transition or "leap" to something "new"—a conception he calls "repetition" (*Anxiety*, 4:354/85).

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70 See Louis Dupré, "Of Time and Eternity in Kierkegaard's *Concept of Anxiety*," in *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1984): 160–176, especially 169.

The synthesis of eternity with time requires a prior thought of eternity that is cleanly distinct from the temporal, otherwise it will be too easy to enter it from time—the moment in which eternity enters time will lack significance and be simply taken up again into eternity.

Sometimes, it is true, Kierkegaard presents his alternative conception of the eternal in futural terms. In a crucial distinction, for instance, Kierkegaard contrasts the fact that the Greek eternal past can “only be entered backwards” with his own vision: “Here the category that I maintain should be kept in mind, namely repetition, by which eternity is entered forwards.”<sup>71</sup> This formulation is important because it brings the problem of eternity into explicit relation with one of Kierkegaard’s most important technical terms, “repetition”: the significant moment, which eluded both Socrates and Hegel, is the moment of repetition. But the “forwards” movement of repetition should not be understood as entailing an eternal future that can never be present, by analogy with the eternal past. Kierkegaard does not want to make an analogy between recollection and repetition but to argue that only the *substitution* of repetition for recollection can ensure a proper conception of eternity and hence a proper positioning of the temporal individual in relation to eternity.

But what is repetition if it is not a form of futurity? In *Anxiety*, Kierkegaard presents repetition (and the moment in which it occurs) as involving a decisive change in one’s identity, such that there is no longer any “immanent continuity with the former existence” but a radical break, a “transcendence,”<sup>72</sup> so that the decisive significance

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<sup>71</sup> *Anxiety*, 4:359–360 and note/89–90 and note. See also *Anxiety*, 4:289 note/17 note. In her “Kierkegaard’s *Repetition*: The Possibility of Motion,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 13 (2005): 521–541, Clare Carlisle makes the important connection to the prospect of immortal life in just these terms: “while the Greek philosopher finds the truth in an eternity that existed before his birth, the Christian looks forward to an eternal life to come after his death . . . so both recollection and repetition are movements of truth: the former moves towards a past eternity, and the latter moves towards a future eternity” (525–526).

<sup>72</sup> As Deleuze has noted in *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 5–11, Kierkegaard’s notion of repetition is not a “vulgar” one in which repetition is a relation between two instances of the “same” concept. Rather repetition extracts a difference from the two, giving “novelty” beyond the “generality” and “law” of the concept.

of a decision is that it *constitutes* the self, remakes the self in a new way. Schelling and Kant had both grappled with similar issues of moral reform, but neither succeeded in showing how a nontemporal act of choice of one's fundamental character could explain this phenomenon.<sup>73</sup>

Kierkegaard describes the subjective nature of the movement of repetition, the way it is bound up with the (re)constitution of the self, as "inwardness." In his polemic against Hegel in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard clearly articulates the charge that the impersonal nature of Hegel's thought makes it impossible for him to understand the "subjective" side of human "existence."<sup>74</sup> This aspect of Kierkegaard's thought sometimes leads him to be regarded as a protoexistentialist and raises the reasonable question whether his account of the moment is essentially a contribution to the phenomenology of time. For instance, in *Anxiety* Kierkegaard argues that we should take seriously the fact that the term "moment" (*Øiblikket*) is a "figurative expression" (*Anxiety*, 4:357/87). The Danish term is cognate with the German *Augenblick*, literally the "glance of an eye" and comparable to the English expression "in the blink of an eye." Although the expression is intended to convey metaphorically the transience of the moment, its literal meaning perversely lends the moment at least minimal duration in comparison with the dimensionless punctual instant of Hegel's dialectic. This suggests that the nub of Kierkegaard's critique of the now, of the punctual present moment, is in the spirit of Husserl and Heidegger and that he wants

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73 Kant is conceptually committed to this position since (1) we ought to reprioritize the good, and (2) ought implies can (*Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 6:46, Wood and George Di Giovanni translation, 68). But this is hard to reconcile with the conjunction of (1) original sin (so that each of us has a propensity to evil), and (2) this propensity is explained by a nontemporal act in which each of us chooses evil. Kant has to appeal to god's grace, which creates its own problems. Schelling (see above) simply gives up and argues that reform is either impossible or is merely the temporal working-out of the nontemporal act of character choice (*Freedom* 389/53).

74 See Merold Westphal, "Kierkegaard and Hegel," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Daniel Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 101–124.

to replace this “vulgar” notion of temporality with an ecstatically spread-out lived present.<sup>75</sup>

But there is a crucial difference between Kierkegaard’s view and the various ways a distinction between everyday and “lived” time has been taken up phenomenologically in the twentieth century. For phenomenology the distinction between two conceptions of time is intended to *replace* the distinction between the eternal and the temporal: the nontemporal is merely an inadequate and clumsy way of grasping the finiteness of authentic temporality. But this is not at all the case for Kierkegaard: Kierkegaard’s moment is the result of a *synthesis* of (everyday) time and the eternal.

For Kierkegaard the eternal is not a distorted way of expressing an authentic, lived form of temporality, as opposed to an inauthentic series of punctual nows. Rather, it is only on the basis of the integration of the eternal into a moment of inward renewal (repetition) that authentic temporality can be achieved.

Kierkegaard’s distinction between the eternal and the temporal cannot be plausibly assimilated to the phenomenological distinction between authentic and inauthentic temporality because Kierkegaard persists in thinking the eternal nontemporally. On the other hand this persistence also makes it all the harder to understand how the temporal moment can integrate the eternal, and what exactly is therefore meant by repetition. Kierkegaard is of course a Christian thinker, and many of the terms discussed here are elaborated explicitly in Christian terms: the “leap” to something new in *The Concept of Anxiety* is a leap of faith; the renewal of the self is to be “born again,” and the presence of the eternal in a historical moment is the incarnation. But to see the

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75 Heidegger was himself deeply influenced by *The Concept of Anxiety* in his own *Being and Time*. Jean Nizet attempts to defend such a phenomenological reading of this part of *Anxiety*, identifying Kierkegaard’s analysis closely with Heidegger’s. See “La temporalité chez Soren Kierkegaard,” in *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 71 (1973): 225–246, especially 237–242. Carlisle, “Kierkegaard’s *Repetition*,” reads Constantin Constantius’s references to his “measured tread” as well as to clocks as evidence of a similar distinction between inauthentic and authentic temporality in Kierkegaard’s *Repetition* (531).

role of eternity in Kierkegaard wholly through this explicitly theological lens is in part to refuse the originality of his problematic.<sup>76</sup>

## 6 NIETZSCHE

The intertwining of the concepts of eternity and repetition in Kierkegaard anticipates Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal return. Nietzsche formulates the doctrine as the claim "that all things recur eternally and we ourselves along with them, and that we have already been here times eternal and all things along with us."<sup>77</sup> The structure of this notion of eternity is very traditional: it recalls Plato and is in effect a temporal thought of eternity as sempiternal. But Nietzsche displaces the notion of eternity from a noun to an adjective that modifies the conception of repetition or return. For Nietzsche this amounts to a revaluation of the value of eternity, which is no longer a property of transcendence but is linked to a joyful affirmation of immanence: "all joy wants eternity—, wants deep, deep eternity," Nietzsche writes.<sup>78</sup>

Nietzsche's conception also resembles Kierkegaard's in its focus on the moment: "if we affirm one single moment, we . . . affirm not only ourselves but all existence . . . and in this single moment of affirmation all eternity was called good, redeemed, justified, and affirmed."<sup>79</sup> But this apparent similarity serves to reinforce a profound difference from Kierkegaard. For Kierkegaard, it is not any moment that can

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76 Michelle Kosch, in *Freedom and Reason*, chap. 5, argues that there is an independent reason for the non-Christian to attend to Kierkegaard's analyses. These analyses form in part an argument that the ability to choose evil (i.e. radical evil, in a robust sense) entails the existence of norms external to human reason. And this externality in turn implies that such norms must be revealed to us. Reason can tell us that some revelation must be necessary, but, of course, it cannot tell us what the revelation is or explain how it is itself possible. Such an interpretation, powerful as it is, does little however to motivate Kierkegaard's conception of eternity because what is important about the divine on this story is that it can ground norms, and the temporal status of the divinity is peripheral to this concern.

77 *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 178.

78 Or rather, Zarathustra. See *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 264 (see also 184, 263).

79 *Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), sec. 1032.

have significance but the decisive moment of conversion that splits one's personal history in two (just as the incarnation is supposed to split public history in two). By contrast, for Nietzsche, *every* moment is capable of affirmation and hence a kind of eternalization. Indeed, on one important interpretation of Nietzsche, the eternal return is a kind of test to see whether you are strong enough to will that immanence be eternalized—that the same return.<sup>80</sup>

There is yet a third interpretation of the eternal return, however, and this one converges again with Kierkegaard.<sup>81</sup> Taking his cue from Nietzsche's insistent critiques of the "same," Deleuze (1925–1995) denies that the eternal return should be thought of as the return of the same: "The eternal return is not the permanence of the same, the equilibrium state or the resting place of the identical. It is not the 'same' or the 'one' which comes back in the eternal return but return is itself the one which ought to belong to diversity and to that which differs."<sup>82</sup> What returns eternally is the different, precisely as different. And it is this that explains why the eternal return of the different is "the closest approximation of a world of becoming to one of being."<sup>83</sup> And here, just as in Kierkegaard (with whom Deleuze compares Nietzsche), it is the conjunction of the eternal and repetition (or return) that produces novelty. According to Deleuze, however, Nietzsche's superiority to Kierkegaard lies in the fact that Nietzsche thinks "the different" through more rigorously so that it is not, as with Kierkegaard, recaptured by the sameness of god.<sup>84</sup>

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80 In sec. 341 of *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), Nietzsche uses this formulation: "the question *in each and every thing*, 'do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?' would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight." The interpretation of the eternal return as an imperative of a structure similar to Kant's is presented in Karl K. Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity*, trans. C. F. Wallraff and F. J. Schmitz (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1966), 359–362.

81 This interpretation is peculiarly French, pioneered by Pierre Klossowski in his 1969 *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, trans. Dan Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), and Deleuze in his 1962 *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (London: Athlone Press, 1983).

82 *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 46.

83 *Will to Power*, sec. 617.

84 *Difference and Repetition*, 95.



Nevertheless, there is some irony in this outcome, since Deleuze is one of those who, like the phenomenological tradition, think of eternity as a kind of false philosophical problem, inconsistent with the intellectual demands of modernity.<sup>85</sup> Deleuze lauds Bergson, for instance, because he “transformed philosophy by posing the question of the new in the process of self-construction rather than the question of eternity.”<sup>86</sup> But in view of Deleuze’s interpretations of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, it appears that the (modern) question of novelty *requires* eternity.

## 7 AGAMBEN

Contemporary Italian political theorist Giorgio Agamben makes a disquieting use of the central argumentative feature of the nineteenth-century account of eternity: the free act as nontemporal decision that cannot therefore be localized in empirical time. Agamben applies this idea to the fundamental political decision, the founding of the polis as “an event [that cannot be] achieved once and for all but is continually operative in the civil state in the form of the sovereign decision.”<sup>87</sup> The decision to found a political unit can *never* be completed because it takes place outside time, like the decision that constitutes my intelligible character in Kant’s analysis of radical evil. But, Agamben argues, this exteriority to time is not blankly paradoxical but involves a transcendental temporality distinct from and irreducible to empirical temporality, something more like the *intrusion* of timelessness into time.

This forms the basis of Agamben’s understanding of Carl Schmitt’s famous theory of sovereignty. Schmitt defines the sovereign simply as

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85 Dan Smith “On the Becoming of Concepts,” in *Essays on Deleuze* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 122–145.

86 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 3.

87 *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 109.

“the one who decides on the state of exception [Ausnahmezustand].”<sup>88</sup> Agamben argues that the act is “continually operative” in the permanent possibility of sovereign intervention in the form of a decision that determines a state of exception. The grounding of the polis appears both as an event that is always already over (never took place in the present) *and* as impossible to complete because still ongoing, so that the exercise of sovereign power is effectively required as the permanent possibility of regrounding the polis. But the act of formation of the polis is an inherently violent act, unconstrained by the law since it is the foundation *of* the law. And hence Agamben generates a deeply pessimistic reading in which the life of the state is constantly interrupted by episodes of state-driven sovereign violence whose ultimate source is the uncompletable (because nontemporal) act of foundation of the state itself.

## 8 BADIOU

Badiou thinks of contemporary (especially French) thought as mired in finitude because of its Kantian intellectual heritage and hence as uninterested in and unable to address the concept of eternity. Badiou wants to change that. And certainly Badiou has a muscular understanding of eternity: he identifies ontology with mathematics,<sup>89</sup> mathematics with set theory,<sup>90</sup> and hence being with sets; and sets are resolutely nontemporal.<sup>91</sup> This move leads to several problems, not least of which is how to account for time. Badiou has not yet developed an elaborated theory of time, but time is clearly

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88 *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. G. Schwab (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 5. *Ausnahme* is literally an exception, and the term *Ausnahmezustand* is often translated (including by Agamben) as “state of exception,” although its corresponding technical sense in English is “state of emergency.”

89 *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2006), 6.

90 *Being and Event*, 14.

91 *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, trans. Louise Burchill (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 47.

connected to the event, the second term of art in his central text *Being and Event*. Time, he writes there, “is the gap between two events.”<sup>92</sup> For Badiou an event is a revolutionary change in a region of human affairs, paradigmatically a political change. This idea of an event raises two questions: how is any change possible, if being is eternal? How is a radical or revolutionary change possible? In answer to the first question, Badiou argues that events exploit ineradicable capacities for self-reference in natural human languages to violate or transcend (changeless, eternal) ontology: in a favorite example, the claim “this is the revolution” can, under some circumstances, partly constitute the revolution. To assure the radical nature of the change constituting an event, Badiou uses a kind of diagonalization to show that it is possible to construct an “indiscernible” set, that is, one whose membership is “unforeseeable” from the preevental situation. To constitute an event for Badiou is therefore to discern the membership of the indiscernible set. But how can you know you are doing so correctly? You cannot, at the time, even if it will seem retroactively comprehensible if you are right: you must have “faith.” The result is that Badiou finds himself repeatedly drawing on Christian thinkers in order to understand this notion of “faith”—despite his conception of the event being radically secular. Over the span of his career he has given secularizing rereadings of Pascal, Saint Paul, and most recently Kierkegaard.<sup>93</sup> Perhaps Badiou is in a position to solve the problem that faced Kierkegaard, of giving content to the notion of the eternal that can appear in a decisive (for Badiou “evental”) moment. Badiou does this in a technical tour de force by showing how it is possible to guarantee the existence of a (novel) set that cannot even in principle be discerned by any available linguistic predicate.

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<sup>92</sup> *Being and Event*, 210.

<sup>93</sup> See *Being and Event*, Meditation 21 (for Pascal), *St. Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), and *Logics of Worlds*, 425–435 (for Kierkegaard).

## 9 CONCLUSION

On the face of it, the nineteenth century was a pretty hostile environment for the flourishing of any notion of eternity. The rise and spread of secularism challenged the often-theological background of the eternal; and the overwhelming importance of history to this “historical century” par excellence seems like a straight-out denial of the importance of the eternal.

And yet the eternal preoccupies a counter-canonical strand of European thought from Kant to the present day. Transcendental idealism opens up a renewed space both for the sempiternal and for the idea of an eternal past, and does so in several ways. To the extent that they leave traces within experience itself, transcendental conditions for the possibility of experience are necessarily present at every moment of that experience, and are hence sempiternal. And, when treated philosophically, as explanations for our synthetic a priori knowledge, the conditions of experience, rather than as potential components of experience, these same transcendental conditions represent a kind of eternal past, one that cannot have been itself present because it is always “prior to” every present experience.

These conceptions of eternity are important (and the eternal past returns in both Schelling and Kierkegaard). Still, what really preoccupied this counter-tradition was another kind of eternity: that human beings can perform, or are even constituted by, eternal nontemporal actions. In a way this idea is simply a specialization of the basic doctrine of transcendental idealism: that time cannot be predicated of things as they are in themselves. But it is not as a speculative, theoretical possibility that nontemporal actions interested either Kant or his followers. Rather it is overwhelmingly a *practical matter*.

For Kant this notion of a nontemporal act is first of all a way of safeguarding the freedom of human action: although our acts are determined at the phenomenal level, it is possible that those same acts are still free at the noumenal level, where temporal predicates cannot be

applied. Thus we are free if and only if we are capable of performing nontemporal actions. We cannot know whether we are capable or not; but it is a condition of practical action that we assume it. In his later meditations on evil this practical postulate of nontemporal actions expands in scope, no longer applying only to individual actions but to a basic grounding action that nontemporally chooses the basic human personality.

Post-Kantian classical German idealists are often represented as going back on Kant's speculative modesty and creating systems predicated on what Kant constitutively denies: that we can have cognitive access to things as they are in themselves. Of the figures investigated here, this is most clearly true of Hegel (although he himself would claim to have dialectically sublimated the phenomenon/noumenon distinction) and Schopenhauer. Despite Hegel's commitment to a kind of universal temporalization or historicization, he nevertheless finds himself needing a conception of the eternal present as what is subject to such temporalization, what "falls into" time. And Schopenhauer, while extending the idea of a nontemporal act to cover the in-itself of everything, deprives himself of a normative outlook both by emphasizing the theoretical vocation of philosophy and by effectively denying the ultimate importance of individuals at all. Where the Hegelian individual is sublimated into the world spirit, the Schopenhauerian individual is dissolved into the universal will—or into nothingness.

But this speculative interest in the eternal is not what motivates Schelling or Kierkegaard. Schelling returns to the practical register and to Kant, arguing that the "essence" of a human being lies in a nontemporal act (*Freedom*, 385/51). However, he moves decisively beyond Kant first of all in driving a wedge between the nontemporal in-itself of things and their *intelligibility*. For Kant, at least to a first approximation, the in-itself of things just is their intelligible, noumenal aspect. But for Schelling, being determined by reasons is as much a denial of our eternal agency as being determined by causes. There is therefore an "irreducible remainder" of unintelligible opacity within

the eternal itself (*Freedom*, 360/29). The second way Schelling moves beyond Kant is in explicitly associating eternal human self-creation with god's self-creation. The conjunction of these two views produces the characteristic Schellingian notion of a self-opaque god. Last, and building on the persistent analogy between human and divine freedom, Schelling also deduces the creation of time itself from god's eternal free choice. The problem that faces god, as Schelling sees it, is that of maintaining his freedom by choosing both to exist and not to exist. This is achieved by creating time itself in the nontemporal choice and sloughing nonexistence off into the past. But it must be a special kind of past: one that has never been present, and hence an eternal past (for at the moment it had been present, then god would have failed to exist). Human beings face a similar dilemma. But here Schelling interprets the failure to choose more existentially as a response to the crushing weight of an eternal decision that results in an absence of character.

Kierkegaard prolongs the existential tendency of Schelling's thought. For Kierkegaard the main problem of the eternal is how to make contact with it in our temporal existence: to do so there must be a particular moment of decision that has a decisive, life-changing significance that reflects the successful introjection of the eternal. Kierkegaard criticizes both Schelling's conception of an eternal past and Hegel's conception of an eternal present as failing to make it possible to distinguish such a decisive moment: to think the eternal through any temporal designation (past or present) is not to think the eternal in its nontemporal purity. Sometimes Kierkegaard seems to contemplate an eternal future (as in his technical concept of repetition), but this seems as much of a temporal designation as the past and present, and in the end it is not clear that Kierkegaard really can provide a satisfying understanding of the eternity that shapes a decisive moment.

After Kierkegaard the eternal does not play anything like the central role that it had. But it is still active, and where it is active it is

still manifestly intertwined with practical concerns rather than being an object of merely theoretical interest. Nietzsche's eternal return, for instance, is often interpreted as a kind of moral test. More recent interpretations of Nietzsche emphasize instead the role of the eternal return in underwriting the possibility of novelty. But even these views come obliquely back to the relation of eternity to freedom, since to be free (in this Kantian tradition) is to be able to initiate a new, that is, novel, causal series. Agamben, by contrast, sees an eternal nontemporal act at the heart of the violent creation of the polis and interprets the fact that a nontemporal act can never be over as the basis for the perpetual possibility of a resurgence of polis-founding violence in "states of emergency." Last, Badiou explicitly revives a number of Kirkegaardian themes, but like Agamben in a political rather than individually moral context, and claims to give a mathematical explanation for the intrusion of the eternal into the decisive, politically revolutionary moment of action. Whether this proof convinces only time will tell. But it is certainly clear that the eternal, in the form of a nontemporal act, has by no means been secularized or historicized into irrelevance but continues to exert pressure on our practical self-understandings.