

THE ETHOS OF THE EVENT:
FROM POLITICAL ERUPTIONS TO CLIMATE CHANGE

by
Kellan Anfinson

A dissertation submitted to Johns Hopkins University in conformity with the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Baltimore, Maryland

March, 2015

© Kellan Anfinson
All Rights Reserved

Abstract

This project explores “the event” and its roles in political life, with a focus on articulating an ethos that better attunes us to an eventful world. Prominent among the unexpected events that punctuate political affairs, climate change drives and is driven by an acceleration of pace in several domains of contemporary life. The difficulty in engaging this event is revealed by the denials and deferrals we have faced in forging a political response to it. Thus the question that motivates this study: If an event is diffuse, complex, and elusive, what kind of ethos is needed to recognize, engage, and respond to it? We are in need of an ethos that attends to the kind of sensibility to be developed generally in a world punctuated by events and the existential-spiritual responses most appropriate when we actually encounter one. To forge such an understanding, I examine comparatively Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Schmitt, and Foucault. Each of these thinkers has worked through enigmatic, intense, and turbulent events such as the birth of Christ, the death of God, the rise of a fascist leader, and the collapse of a familiar mode of knowing. Climate change belongs to such an order of events. I argue for an experimental and supple ethos that moves beyond anthropocentrism through attunement to both micro- and macro-expressions of climate change. This study challenges political responses that use climate destabilization to seize power, as it deploys a history of previous eruptions to help us engage this one. Critically, climate responsiveness requires a spiritual resolve to dwell in uncertainty and discomfort, while being attached affirmatively to a world that contains tragic elements.

Acknowledgements

Thanks being due on a wider scale than custom and memory permit, I will limit myself to the strongest influences. I would like to thank William E. Connolly for the wise mentorship that gave me the intellectual space and time to work freely, and that imposed the necessary demands to make things cohere into a project the shape of which he often saw before I did. Jane Bennett's intellectual generosity seems to be without bounds. She also bakes excellent bread. PJ Brendese, Andrea Krauss, and Naveeda Khan graciously read and gave invaluable comments on this project for the defense. Emma McGlennen, Derek Denman, Chitra Venkataramani, Troy Tower, and Tripp Rebrovick read a draft and contributed essential refinements for the final version. My colleagues across departments at Johns Hopkins have been a constant source of intellectual engagement, support, and conviviality. My intellectual guides at Macalester College—Frank Adler, Kiarina Kordela, and David Blaney—set me on this course in the first place. The Max Kade Center for Modern Thought at Johns Hopkins provided funding to conduct research for chapter three. It often seems that I am simply a node through which various influences have been able to interact. In this sense it also seems appropriate to thank chance.

Table of Contents

Introduction	
What is Happening?	2
Chapter One	
Passionate Transformations: Believing in the Event	14
Chapter Two	
Uncontrolled Experiments: Feeling an Eventful World	56
Chapter Three	
Risk or Security? Decisiveness and the Event	100
Chapter Four	
Foucault's Techniques of the Event	137
Chapter Five	
An Ethos for the Climate Event	189

One morning,
We woke up in an alley.
To the smell of urine, alcohol,
Trash and gasoline,
With a dim sense of a notion
We'd held something in our hands,
That was bigger than us or God,
And we can never touch again.

And we say that the world isn't dying.
And we pray that the world isn't dying.
And just maybe the world isn't dying.
I've been looking at the symptoms for a while,
Maybe she's heavy with child.

-Jason Webley, Last Song

“I think we will fail, but I don’t know we will fail.”
– Kevin Anderson, climate scientist

Introduction

What is Happening?

As a man divinely abstracted and self-absorbed into whose ears the bell has just drummed the twelve strokes of noon will suddenly awake with a start and ask himself what hour has actually struck, we sometimes rub our ears after the event and ask ourselves, astonished and at a loss, "What have we really experienced"—or rather, "Who are we, really?" And we recount the twelve tremulous strokes of our experience, our life, our being, but unfortunately count wrong.¹

In these opening lines to the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche uses the event to question the terms of our existence. Unlike many theories of the event, Nietzsche emphasizes how we might miss it, left only to assemble a few pieces of ourselves in its aftermath. Indeed, the original German text does not reference the event directly; it allows it to slip by the inattentive reader unheeded, with the word “afterward” as the sign of its occurrence. The reverberations of an event can help us think about our relation to it and how our existence is constituted. But such investigations are inadequate. Rather than merely trying to retroactively unearth connections between existence and the event, events also need to be proactively probed, shaped, and forged. Thus the question that motivates this study: If the event is diffuse, ineffable, or elusive, what kind of ethos is necessary to recognize, engage, and respond to the event? But since, as Nietzsche points out, this is a historical question, it concerns the contemporary situation. Just as Nietzsche uses the event to sound out the subject after God, this study examines climate destabilization to sound out the subject in the Anthropocene.

The event is an important concept for modernity and interest in it has grown in recent decades.² Part of its appeal seems to lie in its ability to stand in as a transcendental

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (Garden City N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956), 147.

² The event has even spread to popular analyses. See for example Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine* (New York: Picador, 2007) and Nicolas Nassim Taleb's *The Black Swan* (New York: Random House, 2010). For a more academic and theoretically provocative consideration of the latter in terms of the event, see Elie Ayache's

element in a philosophical system. In this way it can carry out a unifying function, often negatively, that God no longer can. But this take tends to freeze the event, making it unwieldy for both thought and politics. Indeed, the problem is that many thinkers of the event grant it a degree of independence, necessity, and even (anti-)metaphysical fortitude, which it may not have. A short survey of some important thinkers of the event will show this.

Michael Marder effectively summarizes some primary insights and connections between Heidegger's and Derrida's theories of the event. Heidegger's event of appropriation “does not grasp something definitively present but performatively creates the second beginning of philosophy in the 'inceptual' leap that, instead of landing on an already formed terrain, finds a new grounding in itself.”³ Appropriation of the event is thus a philosophical movement which un-grounds experience only to conceptually reground it and, in so doing, draws out what is constitutive but unexamined in experience. In contrast to this, Derrida's event is expropriative, approaching Heidegger's notion from the other side. For Derrida, the act of appropriation that makes experience one's own is so singular as to be impossible, abyssally so. “*Ereignis* in abyss...seduces with 'the allure of the inappropriable event...' that indefinitely defers the situation, in which one would find oneself in absolute proximity to oneself, the situation every metaphysics of presence counts upon.”⁴ Though Heidegger tries to ground experience in an evental leap of appropriation, Derrida expropriates that movement, arguing that experience is itself inappropriable. A person never manages to fully secure their subjectivity because of the “sheer uniqueness and utter generality”⁵ of it. The elements that constitute experience are both unique in themselves (and thus potentially so

The Blank Swan (Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2010).

³ Michael Marder *Groundless Existence: The Political Ontology of Carl Schmitt* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 62.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

for each individual) but also generalizable to everyone's experience. For we all experience events. The event of securing the subject thus becomes an impossible yet alluring task, whose very instability is more appropriate to the shape of experience. Heidegger and Derrida both develop concepts of the event that bring out some of the texture of experience, but their notions remain limited. For them, the event emerges only through rigorous thought, which controls and limits the interruptive force of the event. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that experience is structured solely on a spectrum between appropriation and expropriation.

In his essay "Writing the Event," Roland Barthes analyzes May '68 in France to outline "the traces which constitute the event"⁶ with particular attention to the way that an event destabilizes existing systems and the potential transformations that it enables. Drawing on Derrida, he makes the distinction between speech that tries to lay claim to the event and has some revolutionary potential, and writing, which is "the dizzying break with the old symbolic system, the mutation of a whole range of language."⁷ If an event is to produce novelty, it cannot be approached through a process of "decoding" which would speak to its true nature. Such attempts are always interpretations that incorporate the event into the existing system. Rather, writing produces a new set of relations "subject to still unknown rules."⁸ Thus for Barthes it is a matter of how an event comes to be written—what new revolutionary productions it gives way to—rather than any essential nature of the event. In his analysis of May '68 Barthes points to developments such as "radiophonic speech" which reorganized social relations as information broadcast across the radio and fed it back into action on the street through an "instantaneous intelligibility."⁹ In this way the transistor

⁶ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 153.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 153-4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

modified humans, becoming a “bodily appendage,” and the event by shaping its manifestations.¹⁰ The event played out in other domains as well, including the speech of students, the symbols employed by both sides, and the violence in the streets. It seems that for Barthes the best way to map the event is to follow the contestations and continuities in the medium of language, broadly conceived. Such an approach may begin to appreciate the diffuse dimensions of the event and its contestable manifestation. It stops short of connecting events across temporal scale and attending to spiritualities, practices, and an ethos that anticipates and prepares for events.

For Jean-Luc Nancy, the event is a way of explaining the connection between a particular being and Being, or the fact that a being is. This is a matter of grasping “the difference that structures the present.”¹¹ He uses evocative words like “birth” and “leap,” yet they remain within thought, played with, adjusted, negated, and reinstated in order to depict “the nonpresence of the coming to presence, and its absolute surprise.”¹² This should not be demeaned as an exercise in mere thinking since Nancy succeeds in showing how “[a] thought is an event: what it thinks happens to it there, where it is not. An event is a thought: the tension and leap into the nothing of Being.”¹³ He goes beyond showing the identity of thinking and Being, using the event to affirm the contingency of existence. In serving as a guide to this realization, however, the event loses its own consistency, as Nancy himself admits. It becomes a rupture that never forms a break; a constant nonoccurrence. If it manifests the surprise that Nancy accords to it, it is because existence itself is surprising. Nancy's theory of the event does not point to events that interrupt existence, perhaps, as

¹⁰ Ibid., 150.

¹¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 169.

¹² Ibid., 172.

¹³ Ibid., 175.

much as it does those that constitute it. It develops a practice of thinking, but not other practices and capacities. It uncovers what was hidden, not in a way that responds to it, but to affirm its necessity. It traces the cracks and broken pieces of a metaphysics that was never complete, only to keep the ruins intact, without encountering the new.

For Badiou, the event is tied to a situation that it supplements with a new possibility that did not exist before it.¹⁴ The goal is to respond to the event with fidelity: “To be faithful to an event is to move within the situation that this event has supplemented, by *thinking* (although all thought is a practice, a putting to the test) the situation 'according to' the event. And this...compels the subject to *invent* a new way of being and acting in the situation.”¹⁵ Fidelity is thus a way to explore the possibilities opened up by the event in order to produce a new way of being. The result of this process is what Badiou calls truth.

What is more interesting for this study is that Badiou does not limit himself to a theory of the event, but speaks of ways to prepare for it. “Being prepared for an event consists in being in a state of mind where one is aware that the order of the world or the prevailing powers don't have absolute control of the possibilities.”¹⁶ Preparedness can be developed in two ways. First, it is necessary to turn to past events as a way of remembering that the world can change. This is particularly important given the tendency of established powers to deny or discredit this possibility. Second, it is necessary to criticize the established order. Even if it is not yet possible to show an alternative possibility, it can at least be shown how a given situation is inadequate. These preparations allow one to recognize new potential in the event when it emerges.¹⁷ Badiou also develops an ethics focused on responding to the event. The central problem of this ethic is how to undergo ontological change; how to be

¹⁴ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2002), 41-3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 41-2.

¹⁶ Alain Badiou, *Philosophy and the Event*, trans. Louise Burchill (Malden: Polity, 2013) 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

committed to that which exceeds, breaks, and rearranges a person.¹⁸ Badiou is helpful in noting that it is not enough to have a theory of the event, but that one must also prepare for it. Nonetheless, he does not give this side of the problem much attention. For example, he suggests that we should have faith in the event. But as Kierkegaard demonstrates, faith is not a simple matter. It requires exceptional effort, practice, and spiritual intensity.

Yve Lomax's *Sounding the Event*¹⁹ is an exploration concerned more with the attention currently given to the event than any particular event; more with sketching a variety of theories of the event than how to approach it. She constantly asks: “*Is an event going to happen?*”²⁰ “*Is it happening?*”²¹ “I’m listening out for theories of the event and in listening I’m trying to do some theorizing.”²² Lomax sounds this cultural and theoretical formation rather than developing ways to sound out events that impact our lives. The two are not sharply divided however. One bleeds into the other. The techniques and experiments that Lomax engages in to probe and understand theories of the event may inform techniques for understanding events themselves. Lomax touches upon problems of habit and style, writes experimental dialogues with multiple voices, tries manifold phrasings of an idea, connects theories of the event to artistic and musical elements, and strives to situate the event in an everyday context. Above all Lomax listens, attentively waiting to hear the vibrations returning from her careful yet persistent taps on various theories of the event. Indeed, attentive listening is a critical element of any approach that seeks to attune itself to the event. At times, she takes this too far. Lomax’s near-constant refrain which questions what constitutes an event and whether one is occurring may dull the interruptive power that she

¹⁸ Badiou, *Ethics*, 40-57.

¹⁹ Yve Lomax, *Sounding the Event: Escapades in Dialogue and Matters of Art, Nature and Time* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

²² *Ibid.*, 45.

nonetheless accords to the event. Even so, between iterations of this refrain the lightness of the approach allows the reader to wander the surface of the event, detecting potential connections and lines of inquiry for exploring the event.

Anthropologists have done more to bring the event to life. Elizabeth Povinelli criticizes versions of the event that are unable to ethically connect to suffering that is “ordinary, chronic, and cruddy rather than catastrophic, crisis-laden, and sublime.”²³ “Indeed, nothing happens that rises to the level of an event let alone a crisis. The small child's life-as-suffering will drift across a series of *quasi-events* into a form of death that can be certified as due to the vagary of “natural causes.” As a result any ethical impulse dependent on a certain kind of event and eventfulness—a crisis—flounders in this closet.”²⁴ In light of this failure of the event, Povinelli seeks to ethically valorize dispersed forms of suffering. Leaving to the side the question of whether the event should be required to speak directly to the problem of suffering, Povinelli is right to criticize theories of it that are unable to attend to the subtlety and diffusion that make up existence. In this way her suggestion of quasi-events expands helpfully on the presumption that events are tied to crisis. Yet it may still be too much to keep the event securely attached to negativity, insisting that it is always something bad, even if not a crisis. The task taken up in this project resonates with and exceeds the spirit of Povinelli's work in that it explores macro and micro events and examines the kind of ethos needed to mobilize the positive potential of events.

Alternatively, Veena Das does not criticize the concept of the event, but recontextualizes François Furet's definition to make it speak to everyday situations. Furet defines the event as instituting “*a new modality of historical action,*” using the French revolution

²³ Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Economics of Abandonment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

to clarify the momentousness of such a change.²⁵ Das casually explains that the events she examines do not rise to this level, but instead focus on how “new modes of action came into being which redefined traditional categories such as codes of purity and honor, the meaning of martyrdom, and the construction of a heroic life...The terrains on which these events were located crisscrossed several institutions, moving across family, community, bureaucracy, courts of law, the medical profession, the state, and multinational corporations.”²⁶ So rather than defining a rupture that constituted a nation, Das thinks of events as locating changes in the organization of society, law, affect, and memory at the intersection between the institutional and personal texture of everyday life. This too is a supple theory of the event that helps us think about the multiple interconnected registers on which such ruptures occur and reorganize ways of living.

All of these theories are in some way helpful for thinking about the event. Some, however, begin to lose their efficacy when events are diffuse, ineffable, or minor; some when events are tied to specific historical modes of being; some when events are increasingly detached from human activity, culture, and thought. All of these problems may underscore that the event cannot do what God did, though some theological residues remain. It is too subject to time, culture, politics, contingency, and nature. It may appear that this will produce a particularly anthropocentric notion of the event. There is no doubt that in the Anthropocene, the relation between the climate event and human life is of particular concern. But the ethos of the event that I seek to forge is one that can also move beyond the human.

An event is a break in established processes. More specifically, an event occurs when the inertia of a mode of life in the self or society is interrupted due either to the influence of

²⁵ Veena Das, *Critical Events* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

an outside force or through the tension of its own dynamics or both. But this does not mean that the event is always clear or recognized. There are many ways to ignore, co-opt, repress, devalue, sublimate, or cover up an event. Nietzsche describes the insistence on maintaining a way of living even after an event has made it decadent and untenable. This is why an ethos of the event requires exploration.

By an ethos of the event I mean both the kind of sensibility we develop in a world understood to be punctuated by events and the kind of existential-spiritual responses most appropriate when we encounter an event. So there are two dimensions to such an ethos. First is an affirmative existential disposition adopted toward a world and life without permanence, transcendence, or security; a world which periodically includes dramatic changes, unforeseen developments, and tragic turns of chance. Second is the spiritual character necessary to recognize events, engage the discomfort they may entail, and transform established ways of living through them. This ethos is not limited to sensibility and spirituality, but leavened with practices, beliefs, experiments, and ways of thinking. Drawing on Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Schmitt and Foucault,²⁷ I compose an ethos of the event that attunes us to incipient signs of events as it enables us respond and undergo spiritual-existential changes.

In chapter one I read Kierkegaard's faith as an approach to the event. According to him, God's intervention is an event that changes the world, though it manifests in different ways and times. The knight of faith cannot articulate this event into a stable creed, but must go through ecstatic moments that infiltrate his soul and allow those moments to change him.

²⁷ Two notable exceptions to both the thinkers reviewed here and those that receive a more sustained engagement in this project are Whitehead and Deleuze. Each has developed a substantial theory of the event. Whitehead's thought does not yet speak to me and I cannot claim to be competent to write about him. At points, I am close to Deleuze, though he remains elusive to me. While I do not focus on him, he makes appearances here and there, prodding this project along.

This faith entails corollary activities such as experiments on the soul and limiting the role of the understanding. Faith in the event leads to living more directly in this world while instilling the believer with a pathos for the process of coming into existence. This worldly faith can critically engage theological visions oriented toward life beyond this world, as well as the insufficient responsiveness of those who 'believe' in climate change on the basis of knowledge.

Chapter two examines how Nietzsche exposes existence as replete with events operating on different temporal and subjective scales. He uses festivals, seasons, and times of day to trace how events repeatedly interrupt life, but also to characterize certain dispositions toward those interruptions. Drawing on Klossowski's reading of the Eternal Return as Nietzsche's most intense evental engagement, I show how Nietzsche's ethos of the event is characterized by a commitment to experimentalism. One critical site where this ethos plays out is in his theory of drives. Finally, I connect two of Nietzsche's temporally diffuse events, that of the human within the universe and the death of God, to climate change. This brings together the intra- and extra-subjective, repetitive, and experimental aspects of the event in to rework human modes of living, while not resenting a world that is not necessarily predisposed to our survival.

In chapter three I critically interrogate Carl Schmitt's theory of political events. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's notion of a machine, I re-envision Schmitt's concept of the political as a set of tendencies running throughout society that sometimes become sufficiently intense to produce moments of political transformation. Attending to flashpoints where Schmitt limits the potential of these transformations may help to reveal two contending ways of orienting oneself toward political events: security or risk. Emphasizing the risk of political partisanship, I read Schmitt against himself to highlight political events in

which something that is excluded from the political order tries to emerge. Schmitt's ethos pushes his theory in the direction of order and security, indicating potential conservative attempts to use events for exclusionary purposes. It seems likely that both partisan movements for emancipation and conservative security politics will play prominent roles in how states and societies respond to climate change.

Chapter four traces the way in which Foucault reconfigured knowledge and practice through attention to the event. His project was motivated by transformative events which Foucault captured in the concept of "limit-experience." Such individual transformations are connected to other cultural and historical transformations across larger scales of time. This focus on the event reorients us in two ways. First, knowledge becomes a matter of how events coalesce to form the conditions of possibility for a given form of existence to take shape. Second, personal practices become necessary to account for the role that a researcher plays in the production of knowledge and also to make that subject adequate to the knowledge they produce. This latter aspect is a spiritual and political task that extends beyond knowledge production to social modes of living. Such an approach may be helpful, since the uncertainty and danger of climate change calls what we know and how we live into question. Expressing knowledge of the climate event requires that we become subjects who embody the necessary change it implies.

The final chapter brings together scientific, theological, political, and ethical attempts to understand, incorporate, and respond to climate change. While each of these attempts provides helpful orientation points, none adopts a responsiveness sufficient to this event. I suggest that climate destabilization is more like the birth of Christ, the death of God, or the rise of fascism, than a scientific or political problem to be analyzed, compromised upon, and solved. An ethos of the event is required. Drawing on the insights of the previous four

chapters, a robust ethos is mounted through attunement to both micro- and macro-manifestations of climate change. Experimental and supple, this ethos undermines political responses that use climate events to seize power, while developing a politics that enables us to live according to the truths we believe in. Responding to climate change requires the spiritual resolve to dwell in uncertainty and discomfort while loving a world that contains tragic elements. Working through the climate event will require an ethos that enables us to come to terms with the possible end of the human. It seems to pose an existential bifurcation in which failure to respond could mean the end of the species and an adequate response would entail becoming otherwise than we have heretofore.

Chapter One

Passionate Transformation: Believing in the Event

In the preface to his biography on Kierkegaard, Alastair Hannay writes that “for a writer so concerned about life, Kierkegaard's own life was a conspicuously uneventful one.”¹ The biography does discuss the major “collisions” in Kierkegaard's life, but Hannay makes the case that an intellectual biography is the best approach to Kierkegaard since the most significant aspect of his life is his writing. As a biographer, Hannay has the problem of telling Kierkegaard's story authoritatively, straightforwardly, and comprehensibly, even if there are symptoms and traces of other unclear but strong influences. While it may be the case that from this perspective Kierkegaard's intellectual work is the most interesting and best documented part of his life, this does not necessarily mean that Kierkegaard had an uneventful life.

Reading Kierkegaard leads to the impression that he led a spiritually eventful life. A journal entry written shortly after he broke off his engagement to Regine indicates that he mostly lived a life of the spirit: “There is – and this is both the good and the bad in me – something spectral about me, something that makes it impossible for people to put up with me every day and have a real relationship with me. Yes, in the light-weight cloak in which I usually appear, it is another matter. But at home it will be evident that basically I live in a spirit world.”² Documenting a spiritual life, however, is another task altogether. For one, a constant theme in Kierkegaard's work is the incommunicability of spiritual events. Though he often writes about spiritual matters, there is no clear way to say how these experiences were transfigured into his thoughts and writing. This matter is complicated by the fact that

¹ Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography* (New York City: Cambridge University Press, 2001), ix.

² *Ibid.*, 157.

Kierkegaard, under his name and pseudonyms,³ is deceptive with regard to his own spiritual life.

While Kierkegaard may not say a lot about his spiritual events, he does use the theme to address the human condition and the moments which interrupt life. Kierkegaard's eventfulness is not in his intellectual development and exchanges with the scholars of his time, but in his spiritual life which then finds expression in his thought. In this chapter I draw out this dimension to understand why he thinks that events are important. Even as events interrupt life and carry a number of dangers, Kierkegaard views them as essential for developing one's spiritual disposition toward God, existence, and the world. The urgency of the event for Kierkegaard may be relevant to our situation today, so this chapter moves back and forth between his texts and a number of contemporary problems that confront us.

The event is the intervention of God into the human world. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard explores the plurality of this event in terms of how and when it occurs. Because it does not have a unitary manifestation, it is necessary to read the signs that enable one to recognize it. Actually experiencing an event entails the anxiety that one has not responded to it properly. Faith and infinite resignation are two responses that overcome established countermeasures that obscure the event.

Not all responses are so dramatic. In *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard theorizes the organization of the self. Here, the event is hypostatized as a moment of infinite

³ Throughout this project I will refer to Kierkegaard rather than his pseudonyms. This is not because I think that they are irrelevant, but because I read in Kierkegaard what Deleuze and Guattari call the multiplication of the self in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). Given the problem of writing clearly as a multiple self, I can agree with Alastair Hannay when he argues that “pseudonymity can just as well be an effective means of exposure, the disguise of a disguise that allows an author to spill more of himself onto his pages than would be prudent or proper if the works were signed” (Hannay, x). Here I take prudence to be not just a matter of social standing, but a matter of philosophical and authorial coherence and legitimacy. Through his pseudonyms, Kierkegaard was perhaps able to explore and dramatize a greater variety of thoughts and experiences that appealed to him than one might normally be allowed while also being taken seriously. Additionally, in his journals, Kierkegaard takes “responsibility”—a weighty term for him—for the pseudonyms (Hannay, 321).

possibility that will not occur. Such events enable the self to gradually reorganize itself in order to better express and enact the possibility that the event entails.

Philosophical Fragments is Kierkegaard's most direct attempt to explicate the event. Distinguishing his view from that of Socrates, he argues for the event as a coming into existence which has the potential to existentially change those who experience it. This change brings about a shift from an understanding-centric experience of the world to one infused with a pathos for the process of coming into existence. This leads to different experiences of time and truth.

Expressions of the Event: Plurality, Anxiety, Faith, Worldliness

At the beginning of *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard connects us to the problem of faith by introducing us to a man. As a child, this man had heard the story of Abraham's faith, but when he grew older the story became increasingly important for him. Having experienced the world with the greater breadth and depth of successive years and having felt the recurring range of hopes, uncertainties, joys and losses, something had changed: "for life had *fractured* what had been united in the pious simplicity of the child."⁴ There are many ways in which life might become fractured. One might be forced to leave one's homeland, fall in love or love could be lost, come down with a disease, lose faith in what one had believed, or be confronted by the uncertain future of extreme climatic shifts that will destabilize the world that one inhabits. Fractured life exudes an uncertainty wherein it is no longer possible to securely proceed as before; it may leave one with conflicting intuitions or entirely without ideas of how to proceed.

⁴ Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 9. My italics.

This man, whose life was fractured, latched onto something. “His soul had but one wish, to see Abraham, but one longing, to have witnessed *that event*...when Abraham raised his eyes and saw Mount Moriah in the distance, the hour when he left the asses behind and went up the mountain alone with Isaac.”⁵ With difficulty responding to an interruptive event in his own life, this man seeks to draw inspiration from Abraham's event. He admits to being unable to understand the story of Abraham. Yet he shows how even though the event produces discontinuity and incomprehension, it also provides connections, productive disjunctions, or other routes.

In trying to understand this event, the man imagines different ways in which Abraham might have carried out the sacrifice of Isaac. These satisfy neither him nor Kierkegaard. In his notes for *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard suggests another scenario. Rather than imagining different ways to understand Abraham's sacrifice, the man attributes this process to Abraham himself: “Now and then he wondered whether it would have been more burdensome if Abraham had had something for which to reproach himself, if in his innermost being he had had certain elements that allowed him to read the divine script otherwise.”⁶ Even though the man recognizes that this possibility did not exist for Abraham, he thinks through the story of Abraham in this way. It is the paradox between these two positions (Abraham could not have done otherwise; the event contains many possibilities) that makes thinking through an event constructive for one living a fractured life. The attraction of an event connects its possibilities for our own lives to our inability to understand that event.

Kierkegaard connects this possibility to events in his own life. In one version, the man imagines that Abraham turns to Isaac with wild eyes just before the sacrifice, confessing

⁵ Ibid., 9. My italics.

⁶ Ibid., Supplement, 246-7.

idolatry and that he is not Isaac's father but a murderer. He hopes that Isaac will turn to God as his true father just before he is killed. This is paired with a fragment about the mother blackening her breast in order to wean the child. After having worked out this scenario in his journal, Kierkegaard writes: "Fortunate is he who has never experienced more dreadful collisions, who did not need to blacken himself, who did not need to journey to hell to find out what the devil looks like so that he could make himself look like him and in this way possibly save another human being, at least in that person's God-relationship. This would be Abraham's collision."⁷ It seems that the reference to having to blacken oneself refers to Kierkegaard's own collision in his attempts to break off his engagement with Regine in an appropriate way by making himself appear as such a scoundrel that she would be the one to break it off, thus preserving her honor and standing.⁸

Kierkegaard brings a plurality of times and places into connection through the event. He connects Abraham's event to events in his own life. He imagines a man who also turns to Abraham as a source for understanding. He draws the reader into this situation, urging us to see how events in our lives may share certain characteristics with these other events. On a hot day in the middle of a multi-year drought, we read about floods in Bangladesh, the onset of The Younger Dryas, and future superstorms. Despite these connections, there is no secure way of approaching the event. Instead, events interrupt life and open reflection to consider a plurality of readings. Events are cloudy, and it is this elusiveness of understanding that Kierkegaard takes up in his exploration of faith and spiritual trial as responses to the event.

If the event is not comprehensible, then neither is faith, which is the strongest response to it. "Even if someone were able to transpose the whole content of faith into

⁷ Ibid., Supplement, 242.

⁸ See Ibid., Historical Introduction and Hannay, chapters 7 and 8.

conceptual form, it does not follow that he has comprehended faith, comprehended how he entered into it or how it entered into him.”⁹ Faith cannot be reduced to a concept. Just as Abraham was faced with the incomprehensibility of God's command to sacrifice Isaac, so too does Abraham become incomprehensible to others: no one knows what to make of him. This is an expression of the eternal consciousness created by God. Kierkegaard asks his famous question: “If a human being did not have an eternal consciousness, if underlying everything there were only a wild, fermenting power that writhing in dark passions produced everything, be it significant or insignificant, if a vast, never appeased emptiness hid beneath everything, what would life be then but despair?”¹⁰ Kierkegaard answers with the paradox that is central to so much of his thought: “But precisely for that reason it is not so.”¹¹ Eternal consciousness is as unreasonable as the wild ferment, and yet it produces meaning and consolation. Abraham exemplifies this by taking his own son out into the desert to sacrifice him on a mountain. In his mad faith, he also realizes the ultimate expression of eternal consciousness which nonetheless cannot be understood.

Even in exemplifying it, Abraham gives plural expression to this eternal consciousness. Kierkegaard creates an obsessed man to dramatize Abraham and draw the reader into this paradox. This dramatization expresses Abraham as an event, yet it is the eternal nature of the event which makes Abraham one manifestation of it among the others. Eschewing the understanding, poeticizing the event opens different entry points to it for recollection, dramatization, projection, and response. Eternal consciousness is not linked to history alone but also contingency, fiction, and potentiality. It cuts into time again and again, now for Abraham, now for Kierkegaard, now for a man, now for the preacher, now for you,

⁹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

and each time with a paradoxical manifestation. Though faith cannot be understood, it is an affirmative expression of the incomprehensible intervention of eternal consciousness in the world. Incomprehensibility and the uncertainty that attends it characterize events as the thinkers in later chapters envision them as well.

There is no schematic answer as to how faith enters us, or how we enter it. But faith is expressed in other ways that attune us to it. Anxiety is the internal expression of faith in the individual. Put in the stark terms that Kierkegaard uses: How would one who copied Abraham know if he were truly sacrificing his son out of faith? This assurance is hard to articulate because faith resists systematization and universalization. “Humanly speaking, [the knight of faith] is mad and cannot make himself understandable to anyone. And yet, 'to be mad' is the mildest expression.”¹² Faith insists beyond the borders of reason and even breaks them down so that one does not know clearly whether or not one is mad. But it is not just a matter of reason. “Speak [Abraham] cannot; he speaks no human language. And even if he understood all the languages of the world, even if those he loved also understood them, he still could not speak...Abraham *cannot* speak, because he cannot say that which would explain everything (that is, so it is understandable).”¹³ Faith cannot be formulated in language or communicated, which makes speaking to others to gain one’s bearings in faith impossible. Both reason and language indicate the difficulty of finding an expression for faith.

Anxiety is an expression of faith that draws on the very insufficiency of reason and language to it.

[Abraham] must love Isaac with his whole soul. Since God claims Isaac, he must, if possible, love him even more, and only then can he *sacrifice* him, for it is indeed this love for Isaac that makes his act a sacrifice by its paradoxical contrast to his love for God. But the distress and the anxiety in the paradox is that he, humanly speaking, is thoroughly incapable of making himself understandable. Only in the moment when his act is in absolute contradiction to his

¹² Ibid., 76.

¹³ Ibid., 114-5.

feelings, only then does he sacrifice Isaac, but the reality of his act is that by which he belongs to the universal, and there he is and remains a murderer.¹⁴

Distress and anxiety are expressed in one who has faith. Abraham loves both God and Isaac with his whole soul. This traps him in the paradox because he must sacrifice one to the other. Yet anxiety is produced not only by the event, God commanding Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son, but also by his inability to explain the command he is under. When Kierkegaard speaks of the universal, he is referring to the ethical state that all humans share. But Abraham is excepted from humanity in this regard, and his infraction against ethics (fathers should love their sons, one should not murder another) can only be seen from the view of the universal as murder. This distance adds another dimension to anxiety. “The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he meant to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he meant to sacrifice Isaac—but precisely in this contradiction is the anxiety that can make a person sleepless, and yet without this anxiety Abraham is not who he is.”¹⁵ Anxiety is the strongest expression of faith in Abraham's relation to the event, because it is real without being a solid, sure, and calculable relation.

Anxiety is anxious about its own grounds. “Be it a duty or whatever, I cannot make the final movement, the paradoxical movement of faith, although there is nothing I wish more. Whether a person has the right to say this must be his own decision; whether he can come to an amicable agreement in this respect is a matter between himself and the eternal being, who is the object of faith.”¹⁶ It comes down to a decision in which one cannot rely on others, cannot have a calculable outcome, and has no further ground to proceed upon than one's own faith. It is not a matter of willing it, but of negotiating the rigors of anxiety, sounding out one's relation to God. In anxiety, one either makes the movement of faith or

¹⁴ Ibid., 74.

¹⁵ Ibid., 30.

¹⁶ Ibid., 51.

does not. Kierkegaard argues that an act of faith cannot even be judged by its result because it is a teleological suspension.¹⁷ Any ethic or calculation that relies on the outcome of the act to judge it already misses faith. The decision, the act of faith, is manifest only in its own terms and even after the fact, the individual has no way of being sure that their act was genuine. Thus, an individual only has the ambiguity of anxiety as an expression of faith.

There are also external expressions of faith. Kierkegaard examines the tone of voice¹⁸ and the timing¹⁹ of the knight of faith. He describes the knight of faith: “He is solid all the way through. His stance? It is vigorous, belongs entirely to *finitude*; no spruced-up burgher walking out to Fresberg on a Sunday afternoon treads the earth more solidly. He *belongs entirely to the world*; no bourgeois philistine could belong to it more...every time one sees him participating in something particular, he does it with an assiduousness that marks *the worldly man who is attached to such things*.”²⁰ Kierkegaard further depicts the meal this knight hopes for and the poorer meal he enjoys just as much, the way he smokes his pipe, observes the street, and talks with a stranger. The knight of faith belongs to this world. Even if Abraham cannot articulate his faith to those in the world, he still lives within it, despite being called by the divine. “Yet Abraham had faith, and had faith for *this life*. In fact, if his faith had been only for a life to come, he certainly would have more readily discarded everything in order to rush out of a world to which he did not belong...But Abraham had faith specifically for *this life*—faith that he would grow old in this country, be honored among the people, blessed by posterity, and unforgettable in Isaac, the most precious thing in his life....”²¹ Faith is not just in the divine, but in this world and this life.²² This suggests, first, that reacting to an event

¹⁷ Ibid., 62-7.

¹⁸ Ibid., 21.

¹⁹ Ibid., 35.

²⁰ Ibid., 39. My italics.

²¹ Ibid., 20. My italics.

²² This connection is suggested by Gilles Deleuze in *Cinema 2* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,

with faith is a commitment to and an immersion in the world. It also suggests that when looking for those to emulate, which Kierkegaard recommends in order to practice on oneself,²³ one can look to those who are most committed to the world. An intensified worldliness is another characteristic of a positive ethos of the event that will be seen in other thinkers.

These expressions of faith still do not clear a path to it. Faith is not a procedure, but a movement. To illustrate this, Kierkegaard contrasts the movement of faith with the movement of infinite resignation.²⁴ Both are noble yet different ways of responding to the event, since only the movement of faith affirms it.

The movement of infinite resignation is difficult but can be achieved by anyone. It nonetheless only brings a person as far as spiritual trial. Kierkegaard explains the movement of infinite resignation in terms of a young man who falls in love with a princess but realizes that his love is impossible. He sinks into a passionate solitude. “The knight, then, will recollect everything, but this recollection is precisely the pain, and yet in infinite resignation he is reconciled with existence. His love for the princess would become for him the expression of an eternal love, would assume a religious character, would be transfigured into...an eternal form that no actuality can take away from him.”²⁵ Infinite resignation is a withdrawal from the world not as escape, but as an abstract reconciliation to existence. The pain and discontinuity of the event are transfigured into an idealized form that justifies the world. The knight of infinite resignation exists through this universal and eternal ideality.

1989). Chapter seven of that book, “Thought and Cinema,” poses the problem of a need for belief in this world and draws on Kierkegaard as one of the philosophers who can help make this possible. It is also relevant that Deleuze pairs Kierkegaard with Nietzsche in this context, arguing that Nietzsche takes much the same view in substituting belief for knowledge, but instead through an atheistic conversion (pages 164-173, particularly n30).

²³ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 38.

²⁴ These are not the only two responses that Kierkegaard acknowledges in *Fear and Trembling*, but they are the most important ones.

²⁵ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 42-4.

The young man lives his perfect love without reconnecting it to reality, if the princess marries another, it does not affect him.

The movement of faith builds on infinite resignation to proceed further. The knight of faith “does exactly the same as the other knight did: he infinitely renounces the love that is the substance of his life, he is reconciled in pain. But then the marvel happens; he makes one more movement even more wonderful than all the others, for he says: Nevertheless I have faith that I will get her—that is, by virtue of the absurd, by virtue of the fact that for God all things are possible...[Faith] is not the spontaneous inclination of the heart but the paradox of existence.”²⁶ The knight of faith makes the movement of infinite resignation, but then dissolves resignation into faith. Rather than attaching himself to the ideal potential of the event, he commits to potentiality itself. Even if it is impossible, he acts as though it might still be possible. Rather than transfiguring the pain of life into an eternal expression that justifies the world, faith expresses the paradox of existence such that justification is not necessary.

The movement of faith proceeds by the absurd, while the movement of infinite resignation proceeds by the understanding. The knight of infinite resignation is logically convinced that his love is impossible. He understands his intensified investment in the form of love even as he gives up its content, the princess.²⁷ The movement of infinite resignation remains within the universal: It can be discussed, logically justified, and supported. Faith begins where resignation ends. “The knight of faith realizes this just as clearly; consequently, he can be saved only by the absurd, and this he grasps by faith. Consequently, he acknowledges the impossibility, and in the very same moment he believes the absurd...”²⁸

²⁶ Ibid., 46-7.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

Faith is incomprehensible and incommunicable; it is outside the universal. It does not need understanding because it is not a matter of embracing what is highly improbable but of the pure possibility of God, of the possibility of the impossible. This movement is absurd because the knight of faith knows how little sense belief makes, always feels the anxiety of its impossibility, and yet believes anyway.

Another characteristic of each movement is the constancy of the effort it entails. “In infinite resignation there is peace and rest; every person who wills it...can discipline himself to make this movement, which in its pain reconciles one to existence.”²⁹ In faith, one “has made and at every moment is making the movement of infinity. He drains the deep sadness of life in infinite resignation, he knows the blessedness of infinity, he has felt the pain of renouncing everything, the most precious thing in the world, and yet the finite tastes just as good to him as to one who never knew anything higher.”³⁰ Because the movement of infinite resignation remains with the infinite, it comes to a point of rest. In contrast, the movement of faith is in continual motion, arriving at finitude. The world is invigorating, full of possibility and a sense of lighthearted givenness because the knight of faith constantly gets it back from resignation. The worldliness expressed in faith is deeper than any blasé materialism that never dealt with resignation, the eternal, or infinite movement. Whereas the latter lives in the world, the former is an expression of belief in the world.

Each movement also establishes a different state of existence. Those who enact the movement of faith “exist in such a way that [their] contrast to existence constantly expresses itself as the most beautiful and secure harmony with it.”³¹ Committing to the potentiality of problems, anxiety, and interruptive events brings about a state of being that affirms the

²⁹ Ibid., 45.

³⁰ Ibid., 40.

³¹ Ibid., 50.

unruly world of finitude. In this affirmation, faith embodies another key attribute of the event to which other thinkers will return: a spiritual resolve and even militancy to commit to the event and its implications.

Alternatively, infinite resignation is “incommensurabl[e] with actuality.”³² While this mode of living is conducive to perspectives that Kierkegaard thinks are important, such as irony and humor, it remains unable to commit to the world. It remains in what Kierkegaard calls “spiritual trial.” Drawing on his other writings, Edna and Howard Hong describe this as “the struggle and the anguish involved in venturing out beyond one's assumed capacities or generally approved expectations.”³³ Though spiritual trial experiments with possibility, such experiments are carried out within understanding and seek a position of rest. This is why Kierkegaard values asserting oneself in the world more than struggling with one's relationship between the eternal and the world. The line between the two is thin, but decisive. “Whether the single individual actually is undergoing a spiritual trial or is a knight of faith, only the single individual himself can decide.”³⁴ Whether one breaks out of spiritual struggle and into faith has no ground outside oneself. This groundlessness produces the intensity of the struggle. Though both movements respond to the event, only the movement of faith expresses the paradox at the heart of it.

The struggle and anxiety of the decision, however, are not all that one has to contend with in the movement of faith. Kierkegaard, anticipating other thinkers of the event, points to countermeasures active in society that resist such a movement. He exposes the problem of those who table the event and faith on the ground that it can only be judged by its result:

When in our age we hear these words: It will be judged by the result—then we know at once with whom we have the honor of speaking. Those who talk this way are a numerous type whom I shall designate under the common name of assistant professors. With security in

³² Ibid., 51.

³³ Ibid., 343n14.

³⁴ Ibid., 79.

life, they live in their thoughts: they have a *permanent* position and a *secure* future in a well-organized state. They have hundreds, yes, even thousands of years between them and the earthquakes of existence; they are not afraid that such things can be repeated, for then what would the police and the newspapers say? Their life task is to judge the great men, judge them according to the result.³⁵

Kierkegaard exposes a regime that tries to downplay not just faith but the event itself. The combination of a secure state, a secure job, the order of a police force, and the regularized information of the media militate against the idea that something might occur which would disrupt this regime, calling into question its interpretation of the world and the security of its future. It deploys both a pedestrian journalistic knowledge as well as elite scientific knowledge in conjunction with the forces of order to presumptively refute the possibility that the relation to the world could be different than it is. It is not necessarily a regime consciously organized to resist events; it manifests itself in the routines and thoughts of those who live in such a state or have such positions. They live securely and want to judge only on the secure grounds, expectations and calculations of that life. If an event breaks through that calls this regime into question, the standard of judging by the result is mobilized against it. This mobilization brings the inertia of an established way of life against an uncertain movement, preempting the movement's result because it is unknown. But for Kierkegaard, the beginning is more important than the result. What is crucial is the movement that one makes in response to an event, less so the effect of that movement.

Kierkegaard also points out the predominant discourse in the church that suppresses the event and its attendant uncertainty, instability and anxiety. A preacher preaches the story of Abraham on Sunday, and the next day condemns the man who follows Abraham's example by murdering his own son.³⁶ The problem is that the preacher has not thought through the event that Abraham experienced and is not able to draw out the

³⁵ Ibid., 62-3.

³⁶ Ibid., 28-9.

tremendousness of it for his congregation. Kierkegaard contrasts a ready-made Christian understanding of the event with one which tries to engage it:

We praise God's mercy, that he gave him Isaac again and that the whole thing was only an ordeal. An ordeal, this word can say much and little, and yet the whole thing is over as soon as it is spoken. We mount a winged horse, and in the same instant we are on Mount Moriah, in the same instant we see the ram. We forget that Abraham only rode an ass, which trudges along the road, that he had a journey of three days, that he needed some time to chop the firewood, to bind Isaac, and to sharpen the knife...If I were to speak about him, I would first of all describe the pain of the ordeal. To that end, I would, like a leech, suck all the anxiety and distress and torment out of a father's suffering in order to describe what Abraham suffered, although under it all he had faith. I would point out that the journey lasted three days and a good part of the fourth; indeed, these three and a half days could be infinitely longer than the few thousand years that separate me from Abraham.³⁷

For Kierkegaard, we must dwell with the force of the event, with its uncertainty, incomprehensibility, potential, and ability to change us and the world. This is why Kierkegaard is eager for the event. He tells us of a man who is obsessed with Abraham because he is eager for the event as well. And he thinks that we too should be eager for the event, as do all the thinkers in this project. We should look forward to the earthquakes that have the potential to bring us into contact with the paradox, that give us an opportunity to remake ourselves, and that make possible a relation of faith and belief in this world.

The Nonevent and the Relations of the Self

Kierkegaard comes at the event from a different side in *The Sickness unto Death*. What would it mean for there to be an event that we longed for, oriented ourselves toward, lived for and yet that would not occur? The questions of prediction and surprise would be less important, overshadowed by the transparent monotony of non-occurrence. This may seem strange, unhelpful and even impossible, but Kierkegaard uses it to reveal how such an event can play a role in the way we live.

³⁷ Ibid., 52-3.

The event which Kierkegaard focuses on is death, but in a particular sense. In comparison to the sickness he wants to examine, death in the normal sense becomes a “minor event.”³⁸ So too does regular human suffering. This sickness is despair: the sickness unto death. “Literally speaking, there is not the slightest possibility that anyone will die from this sickness or that it will end in physical death. On the contrary, the torment of despair is precisely this inability to die...When the danger is so great that death becomes the hope, then despair is the hopelessness of not even being able to die.”³⁹ If death is the desired event, despair is the intensification of suffering which results from the event not occurring.

This non-event ensnares life, making death significant only in relation to despair. It thus transforms the existential character of death. “It is in this last sense that despair is the sickness unto death, this tormenting contradiction, this sickness of the self, perpetually to be dying, to die and yet not die, to die death. For to die signifies that it is all over, but to die death means to experience dying, and if this is experienced for one single moment one thereby experiences it forever.”⁴⁰ To be in despair is to undergo death without actually dying. The term “to die death” evokes an experience of dying that is renewed without end; if the end does not occur, then it becomes interminable. Considered as an event that will not occur, death becomes both a minor event and a constant weight on life.

Death sustains as much as it tortures. The desire to escape despair is a longing for the sickness to bring suffering to an end. Yet, “the inability of despair to consume him is so remote from being any kind of comfort to the person in despair that it is the very opposite. This comfort is precisely the torment, is precisely what keeps the gnawing alive and keeps life in the gnawing, for it is precisely over this that he despairs...that he cannot consume

³⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

himself, cannot get rid of himself, cannot reduce himself to nothing.”⁴¹ The positive attachment switches from comfort that despair will not result in death to comfort in the vitality of suffering. This shift establishes and maintains a relation to the event, giving body and strength to it. This is the basic structure of how Kierkegaard formulates the relation to an event that will not occur. We may very much want or need a specific event to take place, even though this event cannot occur as we would like it to. Nonetheless, our suffering in this situation lends this virtual event efficacy.

Imagine someone who is distressed by the current global situation. She sees the only hope for a decent future in a revolution, for she has heard of the potential of such events. Yet she has also been told that we live at “the end of history” and that such things no longer occur. She does not believe that a revolution will fix everything. But she can see no other way out of a situation in which the destruction of the habitable earth, the rising inequality of wealth, opportunity and conditions of living, an increasingly exclusive and unresponsive “democracy” made up of money, media and corrupt officials, a dogmatic spirituality of growth and comfort, and systemic violence are all so closely tied together that one can find no counter-movements which are extensive enough to change this set of intertwined problems. She believes that revolution is the only way out and yet knows that revolution is impossible, for such things no longer occur. Compelled by an anxious energy gnawing day after day, she would be ready to die for the chance to produce a serious change, for her life has become less important than an event in which the existing order could lose its influence over nature, life, thought, and spirit. She is not consumed with anger, sadness or *ressentiment*, for she has many attachments to this life and yet continues to live with the paradox of an event that cannot occur. Every moment renews the conflict between despair over the

⁴¹ Ibid., 18-19.

unlikelihood of a change in the current state of affairs and the desire that change come. Such a person would not be living through a revolution, yet that event would still have a strong effect on their life.

But is she in despair? What is despair? “To despair over oneself, in despair to will to be rid of oneself—this is the formula for all despair.”⁴² Despair is an improper relation to the self. To understand despair, we need to understand the self. The self is composed of an internal set of relations and an external relation. Internally, “a human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis.”⁴³ The self is composed of its temporality, its degree of freedom, and its relation to finitude. But these relations are improper when taken as dialectical syntheses, which Kierkegaard refers to as a “negative unity.”⁴⁴ For example, a person is a negative unity when a person only conceives of their freedom in terms of how unfree they are. The relations have to be taken on their own to become a positive unity and thus a self: “The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation.”⁴⁵ The internal spiritual relation is how the self relates to itself, whether positive or negative.

There is also the external relation of the self. “The human self is such a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another.”⁴⁶ The self as a mixture is established by God, and so the self is always also relating to God as well as to itself. “This second formulation is specifically the expression for the complete dependence of the relation (of the self), the expression for the inability of the self to arrive at or to be in equilibrium and rest by itself, but only, in relating itself to itself,

⁴² Ibid., 20.

⁴³ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 13-14.

by relating itself to that which has established the entire relation.”⁴⁷ A person does not establish their self, nor can they willfully alter their spiritual makeup. Instead, humans exist in a disequilibrium with the force that grants them existence. Establishing a proper self requires coming to terms with this relation.

Each side of the constitution of the self, internal and external, is linked to a different kind of despair. An improper internal relating in the self is despair not to will to be oneself, or the desire to be a different self. When a person is in despair not to will to be himself, he wants to be a different self. Such a person wishes to be differently constituted; to have more freedom, less finitude, to be a different person. Improper external relating to the power that establishes the self is despair to will to be oneself, or not wanting to be a self that is not under its own control. A person despairing to will to be oneself is caught in the disequilibrium of self-relating and refuses to accept that they cannot will their self-relating. Such a person cannot accept that they are not autonomous subjects, but rather are established by something outside the self. This is a relating that is in dependence.

The problem of self-relating is inescapable. “If there were nothing eternal in a man, he could not despair at all; if despair could consume his self, then there would be no despair at all...eternity nevertheless will make it manifest that his condition was despair and will nail him to himself so that his torment will still be that he cannot rid himself of his self...Eternity is obliged to do this, because to have a self, to be a self, is the greatest concession, an infinite concession, given to man, but it is also eternity's claim upon him.”⁴⁸ God nails the self to itself. Humans exist through a variety of possibilities and constraints but cannot escape the terms of existence. The problem of coming to terms with this is the most difficult task that

⁴⁷ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 21.

the self faces. It is so difficult that Kierkegaard argues that it brings everyone who confronts it to despair.

Though one is always caught in the problem of self-relating, one is not always in despair. Not being in despair would mean not willing to be rid of oneself. As Kierkegaard puts it: “The formula that describes the state of the self when despair is completely rooted out is this: in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it.”⁴⁹ The problem is thus one of embracing existence on terms other than one’s own. As I will show, the self can undergo spiritual modifications to move from greater to lesser depths of despair. Yet even when one is not in despair it does not mean that one no longer undergoes any change in self-relating. Rather it means directly accepting changes in the self as it is given, as it is, and as it changes.

Returning to the would-be revolutionary, she is indeed in despair. But what does her misrelating involve? Initially it seems that she is in despair simply through wishing to be another self. She does not want to be caught in finitude according to an environmental crisis as a condition of being or freedom according to a neo-liberal market. Yet she also relates to herself through the revolution as an event. Through it, she may be able to change her conditions of being but may also die in the process. This is a more direct wishing not to be the self that one is. Thus, she is in despair insofar as she does not wish to be in the self-relating that the world makes available.⁵⁰

Despair is already a connection to the event, but the question is how to go beyond despair in responding to the event. The problem is not just that humans do not establish

⁴⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁵⁰ One might argue that this person is not in despair at all, since he despairs only over material things which Kierkegaard does not consider to be proper despair. But, it is not just a matter of despairing over one object or a bad piece of luck that will pass in a short time. Rather, she despairs over complex structures that feed into the mixture of the self, limiting it in a number of significant ways along the axes of time, finitude and freedom. Beyond this there is also despair over the revolutionary non-event that positions the self in relation to its own nonexistence.

their own existence but that God has given it to them. This again raises the paradox of existence, in this case “that a human being should have this reality.”⁵¹ It is absurd that God, who exists with an “infinite qualitative difference”⁵² from humans, nonetheless gives them existence. We might also say that it is absurd that nature produces the conditions for human existence, which confronts us equally paradoxically. It is impossible to understand a power that would establish humans. Kierkegaard thinks that most humans resent this inability and the fact that they do not will their own establishment. This sets them into despair.

To overcome this *ressentiment*, one must move from despair to faith. “Faith is: that the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God.”⁵³ “Transparently” suggests that faith should show in one’s way of life. One’s actions and engagements should be imbued with givenness “to express that the infinite, chasmic, qualitative abyss between them is confirmed.”⁵⁴ The simple and obvious fact of human life is then illuminated by its own possibility. Recall the knight of faith, who’s every gesture and glance expresses faith. Faith dissolves the autonomous individualism that is expressed in material acquisition and reason. The reason for existing is not clear yet one commits to existence.

Faith does not abandon the individual, but develops it fully. One must “venture wholly to become oneself...Concern constitutes the relation to life, to the actuality of the personality.”⁵⁵ Concern is the activity that actualizes a person. It constitutes an active attachment to life and the world. When we are concerned about something, we extend

⁵¹ Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, 83.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 126-127.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

beyond ourselves and into that material and spiritual milieu which is outside of but also feeds into the self.

Kierkegaard suggests a number of techniques for carrying out such extensions. This theme of practices that enact the event is explored by other thinkers in this study too, particularly Foucault. Kierkegaard explains these techniques through the process of breathing. “Personhood is a synthesis of possibility and necessity. Its continued existence is like breathing (*respiration*), which is an inhaling and exhaling.”⁵⁶ It is a matter of a movement in and out that expands beyond the self and returns to it. Reality is expanded without limitation by imagination according to different hopes, desires, fears, or intuitions, but then it is brought back into reconciliation with the actual form it could take within time.

Techniques work on the key characteristics that constitute the self: temporality, freedom, and finitude. Infinitude risks carrying the self too far away from itself, detaching it from the world to live in extreme states of spirituality or abstraction. But too much finitude can make the self just a number, another individual among the mass pursuing vulgar and self-interested materialism. This latter condition can be countered by “volatilizing” feeling, knowing, and willing, propelling the self out toward the infinite. After being carried out a few times a few times, one gets a sense of the ways that the self is not reducible to material self-interest. Then the right relation might become possible. “To become oneself is to become concrete...the progress of the becoming must be an infinite moving away from itself in the infinitizing of the self, and an infinite coming back to itself in the finitizing process. Every moment that a self exists, it is in a process of becoming, for the self does not actually exist, is simply that which ought to come into existence.”⁵⁷ Both the finite and infinite are

⁵⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 30.

important for the self. If one is too materialistic, or too preoccupied with thought and spirit, practicing extensions in the other direction concretizes the self.

Kierkegaard suggests similar experiments on the register of possibility and necessity, where the goal is to become oneself by achieving a movement in place.⁵⁸ One problem is that a person might be carried away by possibility, entirely losing actuality, instead pursuing the desires of the imagination. This is the paralysis of someone who believes that total revolution is possible at any moment if only people would realize their situation. But it is important to see what role necessity plays as well. “It takes time for each little possibility to become actuality...What is missing is essentially the power to obey, to submit to the necessity in one's life, to what may be called one's limitation.”⁵⁹ Someone despairing over possibility is overly attached to a world or self that relies on a rapid or extensive realization of possibility. But by focusing on the relationship between possibility and time, for example, one in despair can rein this in to accept their limitations. Thus a movement in place considers all of the possibilities in a given situation, but then returns to their existing and situation to proceed modestly with one or more of them.

On the other hand, despairing over necessity may produce a philistine-bourgeois mentality, fatalism, or a determinism such that “everything has become necessary for a person or that everything has become trivial.”⁶⁰ Interruptions in the normal order of things can spur such fatalistic views to recognize possibility. Such events, however, must “tear him out of [the miasma of probability] and teach him to hope and to fear” because “only he whose being has been so shaken that he has become spirit by understanding that everything

⁵⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 40.

is possible, only he has anything to do with God.”⁶¹ In this case, mechanism is pushed aside and one recognizes one's spiritual self. This reveals possibility in such a way that it is not already tied to certain desires or anxieties in the imagination, but opens upon faith. “What is decisive is that with God everything is possible...Then the question is whether he will believe that for God everything is possible, that is, whether he will *believe*. But this is the very formula for losing the understanding; to believe is indeed to lose the understanding in order to gain God.”⁶² These techniques cannot produce faith on their own. They can only allow one to experience the givenness, paradox, and possibility of existence. This makes it possible to leave the understanding behind and gain faith.

Reflection is another technique for altering despair and responding to the event. Most people despair without knowing it. They are caught entirely in the immediacy of daily life, feeling relief only in moments where a bit of luck makes this immediacy lighter. Against this kind of despair, Kierkegaard recommends reflection. Whereas those caught in immediacy sometimes require an event to shake them and allow them realize their despair, those who have developed capacities for reflection can gain the distance to examine themselves without such an event, “so that despair, when it is present, is not merely a suffering, a succumbing to the external circumstance, but is to a certain degree self-activity, an act.”⁶³ Reflection enables one to actively bring about or intensify a state of despair. Despair then begins to be seen as not simply an external event, but as part of the constitution of the self. Reflection thus enables one to better respond to events. “He perceives that abandoning the self is a transaction, and thus he does not become apoplectic when the blow falls, as the immediate person does; reflection helps him to understand that

⁶¹ Ibid., 40-41.

⁶² Ibid., 38.

⁶³ Ibid., 54-5.

there is much he can lose without losing the self. He makes concessions; he is able to do so—and why? Because to a certain degree he has separated his self from externalities....”⁶⁴

Reflection enables one to actually begin to overcome despair in the event, since despair is now seen in the self and not just in the event. The ability to make concessions is the ability to give up part of the self and its attachments.

If a person has an even greater power for reflection, they may be in what Kierkegaard calls “inclosing reserve.”⁶⁵ This is a state of extreme reflective sensitivity. Such people require a great degree of solitude for reflecting on the self so that they feel its different modulations as they, for example, experiment by attending the sermons of different pastors. Such a person has an even greater potential for finding the road to faith in the “upheaval” of the event because they are well-attuned to the fine movements of the self.⁶⁶

These are all practices that help one arrive at faith, which then changes one's relation to an event that will not occur. To overcome despair, the sickness unto death, Kierkegaard enigmatically says that “death is indeed the expression for the state of deepest spiritual wretchedness, and yet the cure is simply to die, to die to the world.”⁶⁷ This seems contradictory, for death is precisely what is not possible. But faith is about accepting such paradoxical circumstances. “The believer has the ever infallible antidote for despair—possibility—because for God everything is possible at every moment. This is the good health of faith that resolves contradictions.”⁶⁸ The cure for the sickness unto death, dying to the world, is to establish proper self-relating to the eternal. One no longer despairs over being constituted by forces outside the self, but rather seizes upon the possibility that allowed the

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 63.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 64-5.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 39-40.

self to come to be. Faith makes the event that could not occur constantly possible. Indeed, the techniques for working one's way out of despair already show how one can draw on the infinite or possibility to make small adjustments to the self in its limited situation.

Let us return to the would-be revolutionary one more time. She is in despair over a revolution which will not occur. Yet she can make revolutionary “volatilizations” of the self that carry it momentarily away from its finite situation, or engage in solitary reflection to actualize a revolutionary self. Interruptive events in other domains of her life might now be softened or channeled through her relation toward revolution. A revolution is now constantly possible. Her finite self, constrained by necessity, can draw on the infinite and possibility to enact elements of the revolutionary non-event in her actual situation. Living through this non-event enables her to change her consumption habits, short and long terms projects, relations with other people, expectations about life, spiritual orientation toward the world, personal values, and work routines. This faith in a revolution may incite the disdain, mockery or repugnance of others with regard to the possibility she seeks. But having lived despair and left it behind, she approaches the despair of others as Kierkegaard does that of the pagans: with understanding and respect but without accommodating their vision of the world.

The Character of the Event

So far, I have discussed two Kierkegaardian approaches to the event. In the first, the event manifests in a plurality of ways that produce uncertainty and anxiety. In response, Kierkegaard urges a decisive act of faith grounded in this uncertainty and anxiety, even as he acknowledges how difficult this is. Alternatively, the non-event is rooted in despair. It can lead to faith through a gradual reworking of the self rather than in a single movement. The practices that enable faith may also be useful for realizing elements of that non-event. In

each case, faith relies on increased sensitivity to the event in spite of its ontological slipperiness and the countermeasures that obscure it.

In *Philosophical Fragments* Kierkegaard gives the most detailed exposition of the event. I will explicate this presentation according to nine characteristics, some of which clarify what has already been developed and some of which build upon it. Kierkegaard outlines his position by contrasting it with that of Socrates. For Socrates's, "every human being is himself the midpoint, and the whole world focuses only on him because his self-knowledge is God-knowledge...the temporal point of departure is a nothing, because in the same moment I discover that I have known the truth from eternity without knowing it..."⁶⁹ In this version, everybody already knows the truth even if they do not recognize it. The problem is to recall the truth. Every moment and encounter is a potential occasion for recalling the truth, which also means that no particular moment or encounter is required to learn the truth. The student owes nothing essential to the teacher. Though the teacher may have been the occasion, the occasion could just as easily have been something else.

For Kierkegaard, the occasion of the event engenders a different relation to the truth than all other occasions. He argues that people are unable to understand the truth and are even unaware of this condition. Both the truth and the condition for learning it require the event. "If the learner is to obtain the truth, the teacher must bring it to him, but not only that. Along with it, he must provide him with the condition for understanding it, for if the learner were himself the condition of understanding the truth, then he merely needs to recollect, because the condition for understanding the truth is like being able to ask about it—the condition and the question contain the conditioned and the answer."⁷⁰ The teacher is

⁶⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 11-13.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

an expression of how the moment *intervenes* in existence. The importance of the event as Kierkegaard conceives it is that it does not just disturb knowledge and habit, but fundamentally changes one's condition of being. The event disrupts those experiences, intuitions, hesitations, and perceptions that lead to the formation of questions about truth.

The first characteristic of the event is that the extent of these changes means that the event produces existential transformation. “Inasmuch as [the learner] was in untruth and now along with the condition receives the truth, a change takes place in him like the change from 'not to be' to 'to be,' but this transition from 'not to be' to 'to be' is indeed the transition of birth...Let us call this transition *rebirth*, by which he enters the world a second time just as at birth—an individual human being who as yet knows nothing about the world into which he is born, whether it is inhabited, whether there are other human beings in it...”⁷¹ The truth is not a matter of knowledge, but is existential. Through rebirth, the event produces a change that brings the learner into the world again. This change extends beyond the learner, to a world which now has different coordinates. Among the things to discover in this new world is a new relation to the truth. Each of the thinkers in this study argues that the event produces such existential transformations.

The second characteristic of the event is that it entails a specific approach to truth. “Whereas the Greek pathos focuses on recollection, the pathos of our project focuses on the moment, and no wonder, for is it not an exceedingly pathos-filled matter to come into existence from the state of 'not to be'?”⁷² The event is an experience, a feeling, a suffering. Beyond propelling a rethinking of what it is to come into being, the event pulls one's sense of things to the feeling for coming into existence. The learner thus obtains a greater sensitivity for the process of coming into existence.

⁷¹ Ibid., 19.

⁷² Ibid., 21.

Belief is the name Kierkegaard gives to this pathos: “Belief is a sense for coming into existence.”⁷³ Belief is not a commitment to the factual knowledge of the event, but a passion tied to the event even though it also calls the fact of the event into question. “At the moment belief believes that it has come into existence, that it has occurred, it makes dubious what has occurred... The conclusion of belief is no conclusion but a resolution, and thus doubt is excluded.”⁷⁴ Belief calls the historical fact of the event into question because it turns away from knowledge as the appropriate approach to the event. Nonetheless, belief excludes doubt because it manifests a resolution toward the event that is not based on knowledge but commitment. Thought can only approach the edge of the event, beyond which it breaks down. It is not the case that all thought ends there, but that thinking begins again on the other side of the event under different conditions.

The third characteristic is that this interruption of thought is asymmetrical, which contrasts with the occasions that permeate the Socratic view. Disequilibrium structures the event because god, who is motivated by love, intervenes in the world to teach the truth. Whereas with Socrates, the teacher and the student are equally occasions for each other, god intervenes from eternity, producing a disequilibrium because he does not need humans but they owe him everything.

The moment emerges precisely in the relation of the eternal resolution to the unequal occasion... The love, then, must be for the learner, and the goal must be to win him, for only in love is the different made equal, and only in equality or in unity is there understanding. Without perfect understanding, the teacher is not the god, unless the basic reason is to be sought in the learner, who rejected what was made possible for him. Yet this love is basically unhappy, for they are very unequal, and what seems so easy—namely, that the god must be able to make himself understood—is not so easy if he is not to destroy that which is different.⁷⁵

⁷³ Ibid., 84.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 84.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 25.

When god intervenes in the moment the problem is how to overcome this inequality, how to bring the learner to truth and win his love without destroying him by changing him such that love becomes either impossible or meaningless. As an event, the problem is how to deal with the disequilibrium produced by the difference of existential change. This is a problem for both god and humans, though each has a different solution. God's solution is to manifest himself as a human servant who must endure everything exactly as a human would. The difference between god and the learner is made equal through god's resolution to become human.

But the learner must also have the resolution to believe in god's human transformation. Here, Kierkegaard explains belief through the interaction between thought and the unknown. Thought tends toward its own downfall in its attraction to that which it cannot understand. "This, then, is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think. This passion of thought is fundamentally present everywhere in thought, also in the single individual's thought insofar as he, thinking, is not merely himself. But because of habit we do not discover this."⁷⁶ Whenever we think, we are not wholly ourselves. Thought, in its innate relation to that which it does not understand, takes us toward that which we cannot incorporate into ourselves because we cannot understand it. Much of the time we do not notice that because we are habituated to the regular motions of thought and do not notice the fringes toward which it pulls us, sometimes even passing the unknown over when we're right next to it.

But once we engage the unknown, thought begins to call itself into question, and with it, the identity of the unknown.⁷⁷ This destabilization of the self begins the transformation that will produce a rebirth of the self. This encounter with the unknown is

⁷⁶ Ibid., 37.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 39.

the same as the encounter with god. “But what is this unknown against which the understanding in its paradoxical passion collides and which even disturbs man and his self-knowledge? It is the unknown. But it is not a human being, insofar as he knows man, or anything else that he knows. Therefore, let us call this unknown *the god*. It is only a name we give to it.”⁷⁸ One thing worth noting in this passage, though Kierkegaard makes similar remarks throughout the text, is that he is not only making a religious argument, though the religious meaning and dramatization are crucial. The learner struggles with the unknown in the same way that the learner struggles with god's intervention into the world: they are both unassimilable to the identity or understanding of the self. In both cases, the learner is confronted with disequilibrium. “What, then, is the unknown?...it is the different, the absolutely different.”⁷⁹

When the individual encounters the disequilibrium of the event they recognize their condition as that of untruth. The discomfort that this causes is the fourth characteristic of the event. “If the moment is posited, the paradox is there...Through the moment, the learner becomes untruth; the person who knew himself becomes confused about himself and instead of self-knowledge he acquires the consciousness of sin etc...it is nevertheless important to maintain that all offense is in its essence a misunderstanding of *the moment*, since it is indeed offense at the paradox, and the paradox in turn is the moment.”⁸⁰ Self-questioning in the encounter with the unknown is answered in the form of untruth, sin, and offense.

The individual remains in the discomfort of offense as long as they continue to try to understand the event. “Precisely because offense is a suffering in this manner, the discovery,

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 44-5.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 51.

if it may be put this way, does not belong to the understanding but to the paradox, for just as truth is *index sui et falsi* [the criterion of itself and of the false], so also is the paradox, and offense does not understand itself but is understood by the paradox.”⁸¹ As long as one takes the suffering of offense as the problem, then one will remain within offense. The key is to shift to the paradox, but this shift cannot be accomplished by the understanding since understanding cannot confront the paradox. From within offense, the understanding declares that “the moment is foolishness, the paradox is foolishness—which is the paradox's claim that the understanding is the absurd but which now resounds as an echo from the offense.”⁸² The understanding claims that the paradox is absurd and therefore refuses to deal with it. But the paradox of the event transparently declares that both itself and the understanding are absurd. This is why Kierkegaard thinks of offense as an “acoustical illusion,” because the understanding's declaration that the paradox is absurd is really an echo, a parroting of what the paradox itself declares. Thus the fact that the paradox is the criterion of both itself and the offense. To come to terms with the event, one must leave the understanding and accept the paradox.

Kierkegaard warns that the understanding may pretend to take the event seriously without actually doing so, declaring that “the moment is supposed to be continually pending; one *waits and watches*, and the moment is supposed to be *something of great importance, worth watching for...*”⁸³ Understanding wants to grasp the event, know its importance and evaluate its merit, but this position is already flawed. Kierkegaard continues: “...but since the paradox has made the understanding the absurd, what the understanding regards as very important is

⁸¹ Ibid., 50. Editors' Brackets.

⁸² Ibid., 52.

⁸³ Ibid.

no distinguishing mark.”⁸⁴ One cannot wait to see whether the event is true or not, what its worth or its impact will be. The event requires pathos, venturing out, and transformation. It cannot be evaluated according to existing modes of being but requires the production of new ones. It may be an error to shift to a new way of being, but “error” is not something that would make sense once the shift is made. Belief is belief because it accepts the paradox, the difference, the dubiousness inherent in the break of the event.

The fifth element is thus bringing about belief by equalizing the discomfoting disequilibrium. From the side of God's intervention, descending to the level of man as a servant produces equality. From the side of the individual, the problem is to overcome condition of offense. “If the paradox and the understanding meet in the mutual understanding of their difference, then the encounter is a happy one...”⁸⁵ It is not the god or the event which is understood, but the difference. To believe is to “understand” that something of a different order comes into being. This “understanding” is what Kierkegaard describes as pathos.

Belief equalizes the difference between the understanding and the paradox. “We do not say that he is supposed to understand the paradox but is only to understand that this is the paradox...It occurs when the understanding and the paradox happily encounter each other in the moment, when the understanding steps aside and the paradox gives itself, and the third something, the something in which this occurs...is that happy passion to which we shall now give a name, although for us it is not a matter of the name. We shall call it *faith*. This passion, then, must be that above-mentioned condition that the paradox provides.”⁸⁶ If god becomes man, then the understanding as the principle of identity must also be relaxed to

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 49.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 59.

accept the difference of the paradox. Belief is the passion to leave behind one's established self and embrace the transformation entailed by something new coming into existence. In this equalization, faith sustains the difference between understanding and the paradox, rather than eliminating it.

The event reworks the experience of time in a number of ways. The sixth characteristic is that the event cannot be experienced through the immediacy of sensation and the logic of cognition. One does not have to experience the event in its immediacy to believe in it and undergo its change. Those coming centuries later experience god coming to earth as a servant no differently than those who were there when it happened. This is because of the dubiousness inherent in faith, which distinguishes immediate sensation from the historical coming into existence of something. "Immediate sensation and immediate cognition cannot deceive...In relation to the immediate, coming into existence is an illusiveness whereby that which is most firm is made dubious."⁸⁷ Incorrect conclusions may be drawn about things that exist, but immediate experience knows what exists without doubt. The illusiveness of the historical, however, is that its coming into existence cannot be immediately experienced. In latching onto this illusiveness, belief maintains the difference inherent in coming into existence.

This uncertainty is constitutive of belief:

The same is true of an event. The occurrence can be known immediately but not that it has occurred, not even that it is in the process of occurring, even though it is taking place, as they say, right in front of one's nose. The illusiveness of the occurrence is that it has occurred, and therein lies the transition from nothing, from non-being, and from the multiple possible 'how.' Immediate sense perception and cognition do not have any intimation of the unshureness with which belief approaches its object, but neither do they have the certitude that extricates itself from the incertitude.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Ibid., 81.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 81-2.

Because it is in the very fact of immediate experience to know with certitude what exists, this experience cannot have any sense for what it would mean to not take immediacy as fact. Immediacy also has no sense for the process of coming into existence. One of Christ's contemporaries who saw him regularly would not thereby have any way of recognizing him as god. Alternatively, belief approaches the event with a double uncertainty: "the nothingness of non-being and the annihilated possibility, which is also the annihilation of every other possibility."⁸⁹ On one hand, belief confronts the fact that the event comes out of nothing. On the other hand, belief confronts the fact that the event occurred as it did, that it contained many possibilities, all but one of which were annihilated in its coming into existence. But belief, while constantly maintaining a relation to these uncertainties, carries with it the overriding certainty of the coming into existence of the event.

This sense for coming into existence, which contains both dubiousness and certainty, is disconnected from immediacy. Because of this, one who is contemporary with the event is no nearer to it than someone who comes later, or even before. "The person who is not contemporary with the historical has the report of contemporaries, to which he relates in the same manner as the contemporaries to the immediacy...As soon as someone who comes later believes the past...then the uncertainty of coming into existence is there, and this uncertainty of coming into existence...must be the same for him as for the contemporary; his mind must be *in suspensa* just as the contemporary's."⁹⁰ Kierkegaard suggests a number of ways that people might try to get the most accurate account of the event, pointing out that none of this would bring one closer to believing in the event. Rather, all that later generations need to hear is that their predecessors had believed that such and such an event

⁸⁹ Ibid., 81.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 85.

occurred. The report unsettles immediacy and comes into existence in the same way as the event.

The seventh characteristic of the event is that it only becomes a historical fact through faith. Kierkegaard explains this in reference to god coming into the world as a servant. “But that historical fact...has a unique quality in that it is not a direct historical fact but a fact based upon a self-contradiction...yet it is a historical fact, and only for faith.”⁹¹ For one who does not believe, the event does not take place; though it may still influence their life, it does not do so as the event. Yet for the believer, it also seems not to have taken place since it does not matter when it occurs: it can come into existence for the contemporary just as it comes into existence for the follower centuries later. Faith, however, is belief that the event did occur and moreover, that it did so at a certain time and place. Faith thus makes the uncanniness of the event a historical fact.

The eighth characteristic of faith is what Kierkegaard calls eminent faith. “Faith must be taken in the wholly eminent sense, such that this word can appear but once, that is, many times but in only one relationship.”⁹² Whereas on one hand faith establishes a concrete historical moment, on the other it encompasses the unity of every instance of faith. It shows that the contemporary and the later follower have the same relation to the event through their faith. This is not restricted to just one event. A number of events can be objects of faith and yet in each case express the same relation towards the process of coming into existence. Kierkegaard goes so far as to suggest an extreme version of this against a progressive-teleological view. “In any progress of this sort there is in each moment a pause (here wonder [belief] stands *in pausa* and waits for the coming into existence), which is the pause of coming into existence and the pause of possibility precisely because the τέλος [end,

⁹¹ Ibid., 87.

⁹² Ibid., 87.

goal] is outside.”⁹³ Here Kierkegaard conceives of each moment as a potential event from the point of view of the believer, who pauses for the coming into existence. This goes beyond a notion of the event attached to a particular religious tradition, and even beyond any specific event. What Kierkegaard seems to favor is a general disposition or sensibility for coming into being. This deemphasizes the particular event believed in to highlight the new relation to the world established in the rebirth of the individual through belief.

The ninth characteristic is that the equality that faith establishes between all individual instances of the event can bring about a different relation to time in the individual. “But for those who are very different with respect to time, this latter equality absorbs the differences among those who are temporally different in the first sense [between a contemporary and later follower]. Every time the believer makes this fact the object of faith, makes it historical for himself, he repeats the dialectical qualifications of coming into existence.”⁹⁴ There is a sense in which time loses its consistency and becomes instead an expression of a singular event with multiple occurrences. On one hand, this is the other side of the view that every moment could potentially be an event, except that now every event marks a moment of time. On the other hand, this goes beyond the sense of time as an entity that plays out in increments. If time can be subsumed under the event, then what emerges on the side of the individual is something like the eternity out of which the event came. Thus Kierkegaard connects the faith that unifies all events with an ability to repeat the process of coming into being. What he suggests is that the believer can continue to undergo the process of rebirth, perhaps even becoming an event in the process.

At one level, the eternal already encompasses much of what has been discussed. The disequilibrium created when the eternal enters into time structures the event. The nature of

⁹³ Ibid., 80. First set of brackets mine, second set editors'.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 88. My brackets.

the eternal is also what means that belief can be attained by every believer in the same way at different moments within time. At a glance it may seem that we have somehow come back to the Socratic view. Is this situation so different from individuals always able to recollect the truth in the same way at all points in time? Yet the contrast is distinct: “That the god once and for all has given man the condition is the eternal Socratic presupposition, which does not clash inimically with time but is incommensurable with the categories of temporality. But the contradiction [which is the object of faith] is that he receives the condition in the moment, and, since it is a condition for the understanding of the eternal truth, it is *eo ipso* the eternal condition.”⁹⁵ For Socrates, there are no interruptions in time, which continues unbroken along its own trajectory. Humans exist within time already in the condition of truth, which is at every point ready for recollection. For Kierkegaard, the eternal breaking into time is the process of coming into existence, which does not occur without such a break. The timeless breaking into time in the moment is the contradiction that faith takes as its object in order to gain a sense for coming into existence. What Kierkegaard wants is for us to think of time as a dimension in which the process of coming into existence is carried out.

I have divided the event into an arbitrary number of characteristics. The first is the event as the process of coming into existence that produces existential change. Second, the event can only be grasped through a pathos or sense. Third, the event produces a disequilibrium. This disequilibrium can be seen both in the historical intrusion of the event as well as the unknown which both attracts and limits thought. Fourth, being confronted by this disequilibrium makes us aware of our condition of untruth, which causes discomfort and suffering. The fifth aspect is that this inequality needs to be “equalized.” This does not mean

⁹⁵ Ibid., 62. My brackets.

eliminating it, but rather holding on to its tension and accepting it. We can only do this by discharging the understanding and adopting a position of belief, which embraces the paradox. Sixth, the event cannot be experienced through the immediacy of sensation and cognition. Seventh, the event only takes a particular place in history as a result of belief; otherwise it is as if it did not occur. Eighth, it occurs in the same way each time, confronting every believer in the same way. This is because it is a matter of establishing a relation, rather than the content of any particular event. Finally, it can reshape our experience of time into either an expression of a single event with multiple occurrences or into a medium in which the process of coming into existence occurs. These are all characteristics of the event, but it should be clear at this point that they do not encompass the event. Already they stand at a distance to it and to get any closer involves leaving such characteristics behind and allowing the event to change us through belief in the paradox it presents and the sense for the process of coming into existence it instills.

Believing in the event may seem an esoteric and useless endeavor. But it is also possible that when we consider our experience in light of what Kierkegaard has to say, there may be something to it. We may already be able to think of a moment when we bumped up against the unknown; something occurred which disrupts the indices of our experience. Though we cannot understand this occurrence, we might now feel a bit of attraction to Kierkegaard's suggestion that something has come into existence. Perhaps we will suffer from the difference between this occurrence and our experience of regular life. Perhaps we will dismiss it as something that, though we do not understand it, could be understood if only we took the time and effort to grasp it. Perhaps we will resolve to place this disequilibrium at the center of our experience, undergoing a change in our very conception of existence. Perhaps we can find no examples of such a moment in our experience at all.

Yet it may be that Kierkegaard's thought on the event has a more incisive effect in the context our relation to climate change today. On one hand it delegitimizes those who do not believe in climate change on the basis of a dogmatic and fundamentalist Christianity. While Kierkegaard's notion of belief is forceful, it is neither dogmatically grounded in scripture nor fundamentalist. Rather, it is an existential endeavor grounded in uncertainty, anxiety, and distress. Furthermore, it entails a robust worldliness that is the mark of a faith not content to make this life second to the afterlife. Yet this notion of belief also cuts into the facile binary in the United States today between those who reject climate change on religious grounds and those who believe in it on the basis of science. At the heart of this apparent divide is the fact that both those who accept and those who deny climate change live similar climatically destructive lives. Christian fundamentalism may now seem more like an angry outburst that is rooted more in secular-capitalist lifestyles than Christianity. At the same time, acknowledgement of climate change based on information comes all too easily to rationalized subjects who understand climate change without allowing it to touch the lives they live.

Believing in climate change would entail humility and suffering before that event, as it casts human existence as untruth. Belief would not need precise information about climate change, nor would it try to predict exactly how it will occur. Rather, just the report that climate change is occurring is enough to incite the uncertainty and anxiety that can serve as the foundation for a response to climate change. The existential change brought on by belief would manifest throughout our lives, not as a specific issue to which we give part of our conscious attention. Finally a believer would love the very world that could produce such a dramatic shift, realizing that the conditions that established the believer's own life are as paradoxical and beyond control as those that made climate change possible.

In the months before his death, Kierkegaard made himself into an event. In addition to a slew of newspaper articles, he put out nine issues (the tenth was written, but not published until after his death) of his own broadsheet entitled *The Moment*. These writings were an all-out attack on the State Church. He did this because he felt that it was necessary to pass on the report of the believers to his contemporaries.⁹⁶ He felt that this was necessary in part because his society had no experience of the event.⁹⁷ In these writings, he takes many polemical positions such as: Christians would be better off if they stopped attending church; the Christianity of the New Testament does not exist; “That the Pastors Are Cannibals, and in the Most Abominable Way;” and that atheists are better than pastors. There is a sharp edge to this thought and writing. Kierkegaard describes his task in this way: “The point of view I have set forth and do set forth is of such a distinctive nature that I quite literally have no analogy to cite, nothing corresponding in eighteen hundred years of Christianity. In this way, too—facing eighteen hundred years—I stand quite literally alone. The only analogy I have before me is Socrates; my task is a Socratic task, to audit the definition of what it is to be a Christian—I do not call myself a Christian (keeping the ideal free), but I can make it manifest that the others are that even less.”⁹⁸ Kierkegaard thinks that he was the first human confronted with the task of auditing what it means to be a Christian. For him this means highlighting a number of essential Christian principles in relation to improper modes of “belief” perpetuated under the name of Christianity. In this way he becomes an event with the potential to cause a break in the existing order. He puts everyone to the decision to change themselves. When you have experienced the event, gained a sense of it, and believed

⁹⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Moment and Late Writings*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 73-4.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 129-37.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 340-1.

in it, you have the possibility to undergo the event to the point where you bring it upon yourself. In this undergoing you become an event. Will Friedrich Nietzsche require the intensity of transcendence to animate the event, or will he find worldly ways of rattling the subject that push it to change in ways similar to some of those outlined by Kierkegaard?

Chapter Two

Uncontrolled Experiments: Feeling an Eventful World

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche on Socrates

Socrates was a significant figure in the philosophies of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. They both found him compelling, even as each found the need to take a different position. Kierkegaard kept returning to Socrates throughout his work, using him sometimes as an opponent and sometimes as an ally. Nietzsche admired Socrates, but was critical of him. Comparing the way each uses Socrates as an interlocutor on the event accents the differences between Nietzsche and Kierkegaard on this issue.

The previous chapter explored Kierkegaard's image of Socrates in *Philosophical Fragments*. It will help to refresh that perspective. Kierkegaard takes Socrates' position to be that truth is always potentially available to us since we are always in the condition to obtain the truth. Kierkegaard objects to this, putting forward the idea that we are not in the condition of being able to obtain truth, but rather in the condition of untruth. An event is needed to bring us into the condition of truth. There are two subtleties to this position. First, Kierkegaard still says that the Socratic position is the best that can exist between humans, i.e. without regard for the truth, which is not human but divine. Second, at the end of the piece, he says that there is no clear way to say whether his position is truer than that of Socrates, since they rest on different presuppositions. Nonetheless, Kierkegaard does not think that the Socratic position is sufficient for a theory of the event.

A more positive view of Socrates is given in *Fear and Trembling*. There, Kierkegaard argues that Socrates carries out the movement of infinite resignation through his passion to carry out his own movement of ignorance.¹ For this reason, he treats Socrates as a challenge

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (New Jersey:

to much of modern philosophy in being able to push it closer to a theory of the event.²

Kierkegaard thus draws from Socrates what modern philosophy cannot give him, using Socrates as a critical ally, even while he goes further in developing his own idea of the event.

Yet it may be that Socrates' influence on Kierkegaard is even more profound.

Kierkegaard wrote his dissertation on Socratic irony, which remained important to him throughout his life. Alastair Hannay summarizes the notion of irony put forward in Kierkegaard's dissertation: "Irony distances you from the world at the same time that it allows the world to reappear in more vivid but also more elusive and...more disturbing guises than it does for a person preoccupied with the everyday. It is this distancing that...prepares you for a better return to the gift and task of the world."³ This fits the reading of Kierkegaard given in the previous chapter, in which the event was an important way to return reborn, with a new view and a greater commitment to the world. Hannay further points out that in Kierkegaard's dissertation, he sees irony as an existential disposition: "It isn't this or that phenomenon, but the whole of existence...that is viewed *sub specie ironiae*."⁴ Kierkegaard may not have limited his use of irony to certain aspects of his work, but used it as a way to approach the world throughout his life. A striking indication of this was cited in the previous chapter, but bears repeating. In his final writings in *The Moment*, Kierkegaard lays out his task of auditing Christianity: "The only analogy I have before me is Socrates; my task is a Socratic task, to audit the definition of what it is to be a Christian—I do not call myself a Christian (keeping the ideal free), but I can make it manifest that the others are that even less."⁵ In this instance, Kierkegaard openly identifies with the Socratic tradition. He

Princeton University Press, 1983), 42.

² Ibid., 69.

³ Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 140.

⁴ Ibid., 149.

⁵ Soren Kierkegaard, *The Moment and Late Writings*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 340-1.

also implies that he is adopting an ironic stance rather than a Christian one insofar as he wants to keep a distance from Christianity. Here, Socrates is necessary for Kierkegaard's view on the event. Though Socrates does not have a theory of the event, Kierkegaard needs Socrates' ironic disposition to produce his own theory and to provoke an actual event with *The Moment*.

Though Nietzsche is generally critical of Socrates, he sees something positive in an event at the end of Socrates' life. "A profound experience in Socrates' own life compels us to ask whether the relationship between Socrates and art is *necessarily* and exclusively antithetical, and whether the birth of an artistic Socrates is something inherently contradictory. Just occasionally that despotic logician felt there was something missing in his relation to art, an emptiness, a half-reproach, a duty which he had perhaps failed to perform."⁶ Nietzsche is writing about Socrates' time in prison before he died, when he felt the need to make music. He thinks this event pressed upon Socrates at various moments in his life and finally breaks through at the end. Nietzsche then invokes the musical Socrates to question a number of modern drives that he sees as militating against the event. So he draws energy from an event in Socrates' life to encourage his contemporaries to reconsider their own relation to the event. In each case (Socrates' time, Nietzsche's time, our own time), Nietzsche attends to the tension, problems and possibilities of events pressing upon us and our attempts to suppress them.

From another side, Nietzsche examines the event of Socrates in Greek society. He describes the Socratic event as opportunistically occurring amidst cultural *ressentiment*, *décadence* and agonism.⁷ According to Nietzsche, an agonism of drives was rising in Greek

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 71.

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books,

society which threatened to bring it to the point of collapse. At the same time, Socrates felt deep *ressentiment* toward that society, its morality, and its energy. Personally, Socrates had already taken the path of *décadence*: “to *have* to combat one's instincts – that is the formula for *décadence*: as long as life is *ascending*, happiness and instinct are one.”⁸ Following this path, Socrates managed to master his instincts (or claimed to have done so). Out of this mastery, he produces the formula: reason = virtue = happiness. Caught between following Socrates and perishing, the Greeks chose the former. But “what they select as an expedient, as a deliverance, is itself only another expression of *décadence* – they *alter* its expression, they do not abolish the thing itself.The harshest daylight, rationality at any cost, life bright, cold, circumspect, conscious, without instinct, in opposition to the instincts, has itself been no more than a form of sickness, another form of sickness – and by no means a way back to 'virtue', to 'health', to happiness.”⁹ Socrates offered not a solution to agonistic instincts but a religion, a self-reinforcing and invariable commitment to a specific form of agonism. It is not that a culture committed to reason as a primary disposition thereby avoids the pressure of other instincts. Rather, it must continue to carry out a battle against the other instincts with the assumptions and tools of reason. Such a culture is always spurred along by the imperative that to deviate from the reasonable course is to risk perishing. For Nietzsche this is sickness rather than health, which is the problem with Socrates. Thus there are two aspects of the Socratic event. First, having already taken a decadent position with regard to the event in his own life, Socrates presses upon a Greek society beset by agonistic cultural forces. Second, Nietzsche criticizes the Socratic ethos as a refusal of the event both at the personal

1990), 39-44.

⁸ Ibid., 44.

⁹ Ibid.

and social levels. Nietzsche draws these elements together, using the effects of the Socratic event on the Greeks to diagnose his own time and society.

For Kierkegaard, Socrates did not have a theory of the event. Nonetheless, he thought that the concept of irony might increase receptivity to them. But Kierkegaard also develops a position beyond Socrates in which an event produces faith. While Nietzsche believes that there may have been a moment in Socrates' life when the control of reason broke down and allowed other aspects of existence to emerge, he continues to see Socrates primarily as a representative of an oppressive morality of improvement that seeks to foreclose too much of experience, sacrificing diversity and experimentation for control. Though Socrates may have been aware of the event, he pushed a morality that on the whole sought to occlude it.

It seems that Kierkegaard approaches the event as a single occurrence external to regular life that completely remakes and changes it if one is able to take up faith. Nietzsche suggests that life is beset and propelled by many events which are responded to with varying degrees of receptivity and resistance. What some of these events are and how to attend to them is the subject of this chapter. First I will look at how Nietzsche uses seasons, times of day, and festivals to think through the repetitive aspect of events. A discussion of Klossowski's reading of the Eternal Return carries us from this aspect of the event to Nietzsche's focus on drives and experiments that rework the self through the event. Finally, Nietzsche's theory of a great event such as the death of God may help orient us to the prolonged event of climate change that we face today. He might further inform a politics¹⁰ of

¹⁰ I am aware of the difficulties involved with using Nietzsche for politically progressive ends. In particular, Geoff Waite's *Nietzsche's Corps/e* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996) draws on an astounding breadth of resources to argue that at the very least one should be wary of trusting Nietzsche and cautious in trying to use his thought for leftist politics. I have tried to exercise appropriate caution in my own reading and use of Nietzsche, though I realize that work remains to be done in this regard.

experimentation as a way to change existing habits, dispositions, and modes of being. This kind of existential change is required to respond to the multitude of ways climate change affects and is affected by contemporary modes of living.

As the Season, So the Subject

Nietzsche loves the seasons. They occur throughout his writing and his writing enscribes them. *The Gay Science* expresses the spirit of spring. “It seems to be written in the language of the wind that brings a thaw: it contains high spirits, unrest, contradiction, and April weather, so that one is constantly reminded of winter's nearness as well as of the *triumph* over winter that is coming, must come, perhaps has already come...Gratitude flows forth incessantly, as if that which was most unexpected had just happened – the gratitude of a convalescent – for *recovery* was what was most unexpected.”¹¹ Spring is a season, a health, a disposition, a change, a sudden and strong infusion, an event. Amidst sober, cold and patient living, something unexpectedly breaks, bringing high spirits, energy and hope. Nietzsche draws upon this energy to establish new faiths and undertake experimental projects.

Though the spring comes suddenly, it returns every year. In this repetition, the seasons periodically overtake life, destabilizing and transforming it. Thus for Nietzsche, “a philosopher who has passed through many kinds of health, and keeps passing through them again and again, has passed through an equal number of philosophies.”¹² When life is put under pressure, it is reshaped to respond to the pressure, creating new ways of living. But philosophy can also shape life, which is why Nietzsche calls it the “art of transfiguration” and self-mastery. “One emerges from such dangerous exercises in self-mastery as a different person, with a few more question marks, above all with the *will* henceforth to question

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*. Trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 6.

further, more deeply, severely, harshly, evilly, and quietly than one had previously questioned.”¹³ This art is never truly mastered, since it relies on interruptions that unsettle it. It remains a matter of constant practice with two parts. In one, a person is transformed using fresh energy to fold himself into the world anew. In another, that person carries forward the questions, hesitations and sensitivities toward existence developed under duress.

Nietzsche uses evening and daybreak to capture the same spiritual disposition and movement of energy as he does seasonal transitions.¹⁴ Here, he clarifies that it is not just a matter of the repeated surprise of the transition, but of the dangerous temptations of evening.

It is not wise to let the evening judge the day: for it means all too often that weariness sits in judgment on strength, success and good will. And great caution is likewise in order with regard to *age* and its judgment of life, especially as, like evening, age loves to dress itself in a new and enticing morality and knows how to put the day to shame through twilight and solemn or passionate silence...from now on he wants to found, not structures of thought, but institutions which will bear his name...he will invent a religion...whenever a great thinker wants to make of himself a binding institution for future mankind, one may be certain that he is past the peak of his powers and is very weary, very close to the setting of his sun.¹⁵

The evening disposition tends toward comfort and routine when unknown paths are needed. It loses its creative power, its willingness to invent and try new things. Not only does such a disposition forgo daybreak, but it seeks to withhold it from others as well. The evening disposition builds institutions, limits, and religions to control the moralities and existential options available to others. In doing so it tries to ward off confrontation and make itself more venerable. So it is not enough that spring returns and day breaks. The increased sensitivity instilled by repeated evental experiences needs to be fused to a willingness to break free of comfort and routine at critical moments.

¹³ Ibid., 6-7.

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 168.

¹⁵ Ibid, 214-16.

Though solitary, such severe experiences help to incorporate the new material of the event. As Nietzsche says of the subterranean man: “he perhaps desires this prolonged obscurity, desires to be incomprehensible, concealed, enigmatic, because he knows what he will thereby also acquire: his own morning, his own redemption, his own *daybreak*.”¹⁶ Nietzsche points out that subterranean work is distressing but necessary; without enduring it, no daybreak is possible. Sometimes daybreak requires that we cut off part of ourselves,¹⁷ sometimes it requires that we apply our energy to produce a new self, and sometimes it is purely experimental: “There are so many experiments still to make! There are so many futures still to dawn.”¹⁸ Repetitive events are energizing because they are unsettling. They transmute tension into creativity. Covering up these experiences may be more comfortable, but it ultimately leads to ossification and brittleness.

Nietzsche analyzes these same movements through the Dionysian festival, clarifying the experience of the event and connecting it to other cultural forces. Dionysian tragedy and festivals are also repetitious.¹⁹ Dionysian tragedy forms an intimate link with the renewing forces of spring.²⁰ The Dionysian embodies a “vivid”²¹ and “epic event”²² that incites a coming and going, trading roles with other cultural elements such as the Apollonian, religion, or science. Nietzsche describes this as a “to-ing and fro-ing,”²³ and the “periodic exchange of honorific gifts.”²⁴ Such repetitive interactions are a source of periodic rebirth and transformation.

¹⁶ Ibid., 1.

¹⁷ Ibid., 227-28.

¹⁸ Ibid., 109-10.

¹⁹ See, for example, *Birth of Tragedy* 19-21, and Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Dionysiac Worldview,” in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. Ronald Speers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 119-124.

²⁰ Nietzsche, “The Dionysiac Worldview,” 120.

²¹ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 83.

²² Ibid., 112.

²³ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 28.

²⁴ Ibid., 20.

Evening and winter are not just concerned with comfort, but the loss of control that the event produces. Nietzsche describes the force of the Dionysian as a combination of horror and ecstasy that arises when the subject breaks down.

the enormous *horror* which seizes people when they suddenly become confused and lose faith in the cognitive forms of the phenomenal world because the principle of sufficient reason, in one or other of its modes, appears to sustain an exception. If we add to this horror the blissful ecstasy which arises from the innermost ground of man, indeed of nature itself, whenever this breakdown...occurs, we catch a glimpse of the essence of the *Dionysiac*, which is best conveyed by the analogy of *intoxication*. These Dionysiac stirrings, which as they grow in intensity, cause subjectivity to vanish to the point of complete self-forgetting...²⁵

The Dionysiac contains an element of horror because it punctures established ways of understanding the world, yet it also contains a reciprocal ecstatic feeling. For Nietzsche, the key is to adopt a spiritual posture that accents the latter element. As preconceived understandings rupture, previously obscured elements in the world are experienced more directly or with more attention than before. This imbues experience with feelings of freedom and possibility that are both exciting and frightening. Nietzsche refers to this variously as the “breaking-asunder of the individual,”²⁶ “the playful construction and demolition of the world of individuality,”²⁷ and as an event in which “subjectivity disappears entirely.”²⁸ This destruction brings with it “an energy utterly alien to the placid flow of epic semblance” that “gives birth again and again.”²⁹ Just as spring brings rebirth, so does the Dionysian event. It brings one into the “experience of seeing oneself transformed before one's eyes and acting as if one had really entered another body, another character.”³⁰ Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche thinks that the event incites existential change. But the transformations that Nietzsche anticipates are temporary. Indeed, Nietzsche opposes ways of living that endure too long.

²⁵ Ibid., 17.

²⁶ Ibid., 44.

²⁷ Ibid., 114.

²⁸ Nietzsche, “The Dionysiac Worldview,” 120.

²⁹ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 34.

³⁰ Ibid., 43.

These transformations, insofar as they may found new myths, are also in danger of becoming ossified. Just as the evening disposition tries to secure itself through veneration, sometimes a myth hardens into fact.

It is the fate of every myth to creep gradually into the narrow confines of an allegedly historical reality and to be treated by some later time as a unique fact with historical claims...It happens when the mythical presuppositions of a religion become systematized as a finished sum of historical events under the severe intellectual gaze of orthodox dogmatism, and people begin to defend anxiously the credibility of the myths while resisting every natural tendency within them to go on living and to throw out new shoots – in other words, when the feeling for myth dies and is replaced by the claim of religion to have historical foundations.³¹

The claim here is twofold. At one level, transformations are rendered impotent by limiting them to strict historical interpretation within specific bounds. Particular ways of viewing the world can always respond to new situations, yet sometimes they can only remain legitimate as long as they sacrifice this ability. On a second level, the disposition toward Dionysian events, transfiguration and the very act of creating myths is suppressed in the name of a view which seeks to systematize the experiences of the world. Particular myths are thereby given historical legitimacy while the process of myth creation is seen as no longer credible. But while systemic world views suppress Dionysian events, they also tend to be more fragile and shatter when disruptive events do break through, since they have sacrificed their transformative malleability for cultural legitimacy.

Nietzsche argues that the philosophies of Euripides and Socrates suppress the Dionysiac. Yet these philosophies are not self-contained, but tied to other historical and cultural influences.³² This leads him to the view that all the different ways of organizing life are at their root myths, or arts.³³ He concludes that science is not *the* way, but only *a* way of viewing the world, and that as myths, such views can be as tempting as any. Perhaps they are

³¹ Ibid., 53-4.

³² Ibid., 70-71.

³³ Ibid., 74.

even more so because they have built in self-assurance mechanisms. Nonetheless, Nietzsche thinks that every systematic edifice will meet its own limits.³⁴ Systematizers will find that they need other influences in their own lives. At these points, the need for the transformative powers of Dionysian events comes to the fore.

“Now we knock, with emotions stirred, at the gates of the present and the future: will that 'transformation' lead to ever new configurations of genius and especially of the *music-making Socrates?*”³⁵ The rhythmic coming and going of the Dionysiac means that it will always influence individual and social life. Risking the comfort and routine of the known is not easy, particularly since such secure beliefs also tend to over-emphasize the danger of venturing beyond them. But even living in a time and place in which cultural, political, economic, and social imperatives delegitimize such experiences is not enough to shut the door on them. While the stable view of a systematic life may be metaphysically comforting, Nietzsche suggests that one can also be comfortable with the tragic interruptions that inhabit this world. “You should first learn the art of comfort *in this world*, you should learn to *laugh*, my young friends...perhaps then, as men who laugh, you will some day send all attempts at metaphysical solace to Hell.”³⁶

The Eternal Return of Climate Change

The Eternal Return is one of the most widely interpreted concepts in Nietzsche's philosophy, but it has less often been read in terms of the event. One provocative version of the Return as an event is given in Keith Ansell Pearson's reading of it through Deleuze. According to him, the Return shifts temporal perspective to examine the multitude of elements that constitute humans but persist and subsist independently of them. In this

³⁴ Ibid., 73-5.

³⁵ Ibid., 75.

³⁶ Ibid., 12.

reading, the event is a single occurrence spanning a great length of time.³⁷ While this view seems productive for thinking about our relation to climate change, it may not speak to the problem of responding to it sufficiently. It may also remain too attached to the human, which Nietzsche is critical of.

Another version of the Eternal Return as an event has been elaborated by Pierre Klossowski in *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*. Klossowski argues that the Return recasts the role of the philosopher, who neither describes the truth of what happens, nor ascertains that truth to take action, nor builds a persuasive and predictive account of the event.³⁸ “[R]ather, does not this event, which the philosopher apprehends (the consequences of the disappearance of a unique God, the guarantor of identities, and the return of multiple gods), first have to be *mimed*, in accordance with the gestural semiotic of the Soothsayers and the Prophets?”³⁹ The philosopher's intervention is to mime the event, experimenting with different ways of duplicating it to make it tangible. The Eternal Return is not a conceptual elaboration, but is enacted in thought and behavior. It is experimental because it cannot be embodied in a consistent way. Klossowski connects the Return to the death of God to show that without God, no consistent identity can be guaranteed. The only actualization possible is the repetitive return of different identities, each with the same consistency as god, but without a transcendental unifying function. This is why Nietzsche undertakes a number of projects, puts forth a variety of concepts, and takes on different influences and personae.

Reading Nietzsche's diaries and letters, Klossowski suggests that “the thought of the Eternal Return of the Same came to Nietzsche as a [sic] *abrupt awakening* in the midst of a

³⁷ Keith Ansell Pearson, “Living the Eternal Return as the Event: Nietzsche with Deleuze,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 14, Eternal Recurrence (1997): 64-97.

³⁸ Pierre Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 3-4.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Stimmung, a certain tonality of the soul. Initially confused with this *Stimmung*, it gradually emerged as a thought; nonetheless, it preserved the character of a revelation – as a *sudden unveiling*.⁴⁰ The actual event cannot be conceptualized. It is a soulful experience, an intensity that dissolves the subject and interrupts conceptualization. After the fact, when thought begins to organize and conceptualize the event, it takes on a symbolic meaning that preserves the sudden and revelatory character of the event.

The point of the Return, however, is not fidelity to a single revelatory moment, but repeated attempts to reengage and reactivate it. These attempts come up against established moralities.

We must break with the classic rule of morality, which – on the pretext of realizing a human potential – makes humanity dependent upon habits adopted *once and for all*...Behavior can never be limited by its regular repetition, nor can it limit thinking itself. A mode of thought that would restrict behavior, or a mode of behavior that would restrict thought – both comply with an extremely useful automatism: they ensure *security*...By contrast, any thought that allows itself to be called into question, whether by an internal or external event, reveals a certain capacity for starting over.⁴¹

Two responses to the event and two forms of repetition are distinguished. On one hand, Nietzsche breaks away from a morality which limits thought and behavior by imposing a regular repetition upon the world in the name of security. This established philosophical approach understands events as occurrences whose value is to reinforce this morality.

Alternatively, his approach is one which welcomes internal and external events to see how a morality of regular repetition is actually only a “provisional state.”⁴² Two different responses correspond to these approaches. The first experiences unease when confronted by events that unsettle established morality. The second uses the event as an opportunity to call morality into question. This response suggests a different model of repetition in which the “security” of an established morality is abandoned to begin again.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 56.

⁴¹ Ibid., 4.

⁴² Ibid.

Beginning anew requires forgetting. “Is not forgetting the source as well as the indispensable condition not only for the revelation of the Eternal Return, but also for *the sudden transformation of the identity* of the person to whom it is revealed? Forgetting thus conceals eternal becoming and the absorption of all the identities in being.”⁴³ The Eternal Return is characterized by forgetting insofar as it both produces forgetting and requires it as a condition of its occurrence. In the event, subjectivity and identity are rattled. Yet at the same time, this is only possible because stable identities and understandings require forgetting the continual flux of intensities that underlie experience. Individual identity is a point in which this flux coheres, but it is through the decoherence of the individual that a new identity becomes possible. “By liberating the fluctuations that were signifying [the self] as a *self*, in such a manner that it is the past that rings out anew in its present. It is not the fact of *being there* that fascinates Nietzsche in this moment, but the fact of *returning* in what becomes: this necessity – which was lived and must be relived – defies the will and the creation of a meaning.”⁴⁴ A loop is formed between the past and present that connects how one became what one is with how one is becoming in the moment. Returning occurs in a new context: a past becoming compels one to recharge the present. There is no pure experience of the flux itself, but only a more open and supple feeling for how we have become and are becoming in it.

The way that this event manifests is not, however, limited to the experience of the subject. Klossowski links that which relates to the Return to the idea of the “singular,” while that which relates to language, comprehension, institutionalization, and normalization is linked under the idea of the “gregarious.” The event calls the gregarious into question through the singular.

⁴³ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 65.

For Nietzsche, the singular case rediscovers, in an 'anachronistic' manner, an ancient way of existing – whose reawakening in itself presupposes that *present* conditions do not correspond to the impulsive state which is in some manner being affirmed through it. Depending on the strength of its intensity, however, this singular state, though anachronistic in relation to the institutional level of gregariousness, can bring about a de-actualization of that institution itself and denounce it in turn as anachronistic. That every reality as such comes to be de-actualized in relation to the singular case, that the resulting emotion seizes the subject's behavior and forces it into action – this is an adventure that can modify the course of events, following a circuit of chance that Nietzsche will make the dimension of his thought.⁴⁵

In linking a past state to the present through the intensities of becoming in an event, an anachronistic relation with the present is formed. At the same time, an experience of the intensities that are becoming in the present may be strong enough to dissolve the organization of experience in the present. This event, though it is experienced only by the singular individual, does not just affect the individual. The gregarious codes that previously directed behavior no longer channel the intensities of becoming since those channels have been de-actualized and new ones are being formed. It is not just that the subject now thinks differently, but that it is already behaving differently within the institutional context.

Thus for Nietzsche, it is a question of how sentiments and dispositions influence action and how to modify those dispositions. “*As soon as we act practically*”, he says, “*we have to follow the prejudices of our sentiments.*” This is exactly what Nietzsche did with the intention of putting forward a new meaning and goal.⁴⁶ Most sentiment organizes the flux of intensities according to gregarious principles. This inclines behavior toward established moral codes. Thus it becomes a question of how to rework sentiment, how to take part in the organization of intensities. Klossowski suggests that: “the selection [of the singular out of gregarious morality] will take place in *secret* (the *Vicious Circle*), that is, it will be undertaken *in the name of this secret* by certain experimenters. A purely experimental doctrine of selection will be put into practice as a 'political' philosophy...the secret of the Vicious Circle can also be

⁴⁵ Ibid., 80.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 121.

regarded as an *invented* simulacrum in accordance with one of Nietzsche's *phantasms*.⁴⁷ The selection is carried out in secret because the experimenter must be alone, free to engage singularity away from gregariousness and experience both failure and success.⁴⁸ The new selections are then introduced into gregariousness through the sensibilities and practical activity of the experimenter, changing them as this is done. The idea of inventing a simulacrum in accordance with Nietzsche's phantasm is a matter of producing an invented constellation of intensities, since the intensities producing the phantasm (the high tonality of soul) in the event are ineffable.⁴⁹ The simulacrum is a new sentiment inserted into experience. It is not a set of intensities drawn from experience, but a manufactured one that uses the disruption of the event to create a new channeling of intensities, in opposition to those which are already institutionalized. The production of simulacra is a "practice" that takes up "a positive notion of the false" which can "generate new conditions of life."⁵⁰ Reorganizing the sentiments is thus "an exercise in continually maintaining oneself in a discontinuity with respect to everyday continuity."⁵¹

Through the active production and embodiment of simulacra, the event has its effects. Those effects ultimately repeat the event through their own efficacy. "Thought must itself have the same *effectiveness* as what happens *outside of it* and *without it*. This type of thought, in the long run, must therefore *come to pass* as an *event*."⁵² Nietzsche does not just seek an idea of Eternal Return that enables one to evaluate life, it must become life. He criticizes the extent to which humans attribute intention and causality to themselves and the world; they live through a reality principle, a morality, and a gregarious language. He wants to insert the

⁴⁷ Ibid., 125.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 146.

⁴⁹ Daniel W. Smith, translator's preface to *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, by Pierre Klossowski (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), x-xi.

⁵⁰ Klossowski, *The Vicious Circle*, 132-3.

⁵¹ Ibid., 65.

⁵² Ibid., 168-9.

Eternal Return as an event on the same register as the compulsion to continue producing institutions useful to the species, but as a force that interrupts it. “[T]he 'Vicious Circle'...not only turns the apparently irreversible progression of history into a regressive movement (toward an always undeterminable starting-point), but also maintains the species in an 'initial' state that is entirely dependent on *experimental initiatives*...In the course of events, the Eternal Return, as experience, as the thought of thoughts, constitutes the event that abolishes history.”⁵³ The experience of the Eternal Return broke into Nietzsche's life and became an uncertain starting point to which he would continue to return and to which his philosophy urges us to continue to return. It abolishes history because returning to the experimental starting point cannot be worked into the gregarious history of the human species. In continually starting over, Nietzsche both enacts and becomes an event.

The efficacy of this repeated interruption can be seen at three levels: the subject, the intersubjective, and the world. At the subjective level, “the agent *unmakes* and remakes itself in accordance with the receptivity of other agents – agents of comprehension.”⁵⁴ These other agents⁵⁵ can be people or institutions, but what is important is that they operate through and impose gregarious meaning upon the subject. Though others are involved at this level, the event manifests itself only in the subject. Nietzsche adopted the image of the mask as the decisive enactment of this effect.

The mask hides the absence of a determinate physiognomy, it parallels his relationship with the unforeseeable and unfathomable Chaos. But the mask is nonetheless an emergence from Chaos – the limit-point where necessity and chance confront each other...[it] belongs to external interpretation, but corresponds to an internal desire of suggestion...[it] signals the barely

⁵³ Ibid., 170-71.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 218.

⁵⁵ The term agent is not to be taken in the standard way. It is the translation of Klossowski's *suppôt*, which is “a complex and fragile entity that bestows a psychical and organic unity upon the moving chaos of the impulses, primarily through the grammatical fiction of the 'I', which interprets the impulses in terms of a hierarchy of gregarious needs (both material and moral), and dissimulates itself through a network of concepts (substance, cause, identity, self, world, God) that reduces the combat of the impulses to silence.” Smith, translator's preface, xii-xiii.

perceptible demarcation *where the impulses still hesitate to be ascribed any identification, where necessity, which is unaware of itself, appears to be arbitrary, before receiving an externally necessary signification...* It expressed more directly the coincidence of the *fortuitous case (Zufall)* with the *sudden idea (Einfall)*.⁵⁶

With the mask, one wears their own ego as a chance production, no longer living directly that person, but living at the limit between the singular and the gregarious. This is also the limit between the creation and dissolution of the self, the flux of impulses and the gregarious institutions. Rather than experiencing institutionalized subjectivity, one experiences the suggestion (before gregarious interpretation) of that subjectivity out of the impulses. It is then possible to attend to the way that various institutions solidify and manipulate that subjectivity. This is the point at which the arbitrary becomes necessary, but also at which the ‘necessity’ of identity becomes fortuitous

Klossowski looks at letters and diaries of Nietzsche's acquaintances to show that there is an intersubjective dimension to this event, even if it cannot be gregariously articulated. The close friends with whom Nietzsche shared the Eternal Return were often confused by the idea and thought that he was referring to a system of thought from antiquity. Yet there was also an affective dimension which accounts for “the impression of strangeness felt by his friends.”⁵⁷ “Overbeck emphasizes the state Nietzsche was in when he spoke with him (bedridden, suffering from a migraine), the disturbing tone of his hoarse voice, the spectacular character of the communication.”⁵⁸ It is as if the affective dimension of the Return was expressed in the intensity of Nietzsche's person when he tried to share it. “This experience became obscure once Nietzsche tried to initiate his friends into it, as if into a semblance of a doctrine that required the understanding – and they *felt* the delirium.”⁵⁹ The

⁵⁶ Ibid., 224-5.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 213.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 217.

combination of an obscure doctrine with Nietzsche's own affective performance was read by Nietzsche's friends as a symptom of a defective mental state rather than as two sides of a conceptual experience. In these moments, Nietzsche was dismissed rather than taken seriously. Klossowski, however, argues that this was an effective intersubjective enactment of the event. "When Nietzsche invited them to think with him, he was really inviting them to feel, and thus to feel his own prior emotion."⁶⁰ In inviting them to feel, he tried to show them how thought comes from the impulses, the same insight he had when he experienced the Eternal Return.

The Eternal Return also has worldly effects. As Klossowski says of Nietzsche: "*He would incarnate the fortuitous case. At the same time, he would reproduce the world, which is merely a combination of random events. Thus he would train himself in the practice of the unforeseeable.*"⁶¹ As one becomes a fortuitous case, a mask, the world becomes a fortuitous case as well. It is remade without agency, causality, purpose and necessity. Being now constituted as an event, the world is also seen as subject to the flux of intensities. Nietzsche enacted, experimented, and projected the contingent world in a way inaccessible and unforeseeable to teleological or closed world views. Living at this limit carries risks. Klossowski suggests that Nietzsche's collapse in Turin creates the world in a different fashion. "In a way, the ruin of the lucid Nietzsche worked to the *benefit* of the whole of the Nietzschean pathos: the *transfiguration of the world*; the *rejoicing of the heavens*; the reconciled confrontation of Dionysus and the Crucified, which...was impossible to live – all this is what constituted the ecstasy of Turin."⁶² Klossowski diverges from many readers of Nietzsche in seeing his collapse as connected to the Eternal Return as well as his earliest experiences and

⁶⁰ Ibid., 218.

⁶¹ Ibid., 220.

⁶² Ibid., 238-9.

insights. In Nietzsche's last miming of the Return, he embodied the possibility of creating any world. "Such is the world as it appeared to Nietzsche under the monumental aspect of Turin: a *discontinuity of intensities* that are given *names* only through the *interpretation of those who receive his messages*; the latter still represent the *fixity of signs*, whereas in Nietzsche *this fixity no longer exists*."⁶³ Nietzsche slipped into an unmediated experience of intensity, wherein what coherence there was, was established by institutional authorities rather than himself. While the former way of recreating the world is more productive for responding to the event, the latter shows the efficacy and danger that it may hold.

The Eternal Return is a sudden event that contains a number of repetitive elements. It reveals the fortuitous case in the moment and represents every case as replete with fortuity and thus as a repetition of chance acting through gregarious molds and singular intensities. Though language can suggest this idea, it is insufficient to comprehend it. It repeats in experience at different times and with different effects, sometimes individually, sometimes intersubjectively, and sometimes within a whole world. Each occurrence is an opportunity to refashion institutionalized language, knowledge, and practices. Thus the event of the Return can change the shape that intensities take as they become experience.

On September 27, 2013, after an all-night session, The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a report detailing the current state of climate science and its predictions for the future. Later that morning, meteorologist Eric Holthaus published a short article on the report entitled: "The world's best scientists agree: On our current path, global warming is irreversible—and getting worse."⁶⁴ He found it a straightforward, perhaps even routine task

⁶³ Ibid., 252.

⁶⁴ Eric Holthaus, "The world's best scientists agree: On our current path, global warming is irreversible—and getting worse," *Quartz*, September 27, 2013, <http://qz.com/129122/the-worlds-best-scientists-agree-on->

to convey the information contained in that report: that humans cause global warming, that severe impacts are on the horizon, that geoengineering is not an option, and that something must be done immediately. Later in the day, he began “thinking about the report more existentially. Any hope for a healthy planet seemed to be dwindling, a death warrant written in stark, black-and-white data. It came as a shock.”⁶⁵ So, after switching from a scientific, analytical, and journalistic mode of thinking to an existential one, he shocked himself. The data printed across the page was transfigured into a death warrant in which everyday human action authorized sovereign nature to execute the species.

What then happened in a boarding area in San Francisco International Airport has been described as an “epiphany,”⁶⁶ and a “meltdown.”⁶⁷ Holthaus calls it a “hopeless moment.”⁶⁸ While talking to his wife on the phone, he suddenly found himself weeping. Shortly afterward, he sent the following tweet: “I just broke down in tears in boarding area at SFO while on phone with my wife. I've never cried because of a science report before. #IPCC”⁶⁹ Two minutes later, he tweeted: “I realized, just now: This has to be the last flight I ever take. I'm committing right now to stop flying. It's not worth the climate.”⁷⁰ The following tweets document mixed emotions, consideration of a vasectomy, and a willingness to go extinct.⁷¹

our-current-path-global-warming-is-irreversible-and-getting-worse/

⁶⁵ Eric Holthaus, “Why I’m never flying again,” *Quartz*, October 1, 2013, <http://qz.com/129477/why-im-never-flying-again/>.

⁶⁶ “What Triggers a Climate Epiphany? With Eric Holthaus,” by Tom Bowman, www.tombowman.com, October 26, 2013, [tombowman.com/posts/what-triggers-a-climate-epiphany/](http://www.tombowman.com/posts/what-triggers-a-climate-epiphany/).

⁶⁷ Fox News Insider, “Gutfeld Reacts to Meteorologist Quitting Air Travel Over Climate Report,” *Fox News Insider (blog)*, *Fox News Channel*, September 30, 2013, <http://foxnewsinsider.com/2013/09/30/meteorologist-eric-holthaus-quits-air-travel-over-un-climate-report>

⁶⁸ Suzanne Goldenberg, “IPCC report makes US meteorologist cry – and give up flying,” *The Guardian*, October 3, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/oct/03/ipcc-climate-report-eric-holthaus>.

⁶⁹ Holthaus, “Why I’m never flying again.”

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Marie-Louise Olson, “A weather man breaks down in tears and vows NEVER to fly again due to grim climate-change report,” *Daily Mail*, September 28, 2013, accessed March 30, 2014,

Efforts to promote carbon reduction were not new to Holthaus. He already engaged in green behavior such as recycling, turning off the lights, and using reusable bags. He had also adopted a couple of more substantial commitments: being vegetarian and car-sharing. But he still traveled extensively by plane.⁷² The dangerous effects of climate change were also known to him. Holthaus gained a lot of notoriety for his reporting during Hurricane Sandy. His coverage was notable for the links he drew between the storm and climate change.⁷³ Before his transformation he thought he was acting responsibly yet at the same time he knew it wasn't enough. Why did someone who knew the dangers of climate change and who had already taken steps to live more responsibly suddenly make such a dramatic commitment?

Klossowski's reading of Nietzsche on the Eternal Return may help to clarify Holthaus's reaction. The way that the IPCC report interrupted Holthaus's life is just one of the many interruptions that climate change entails. His response seems to mimick that interruptive force. In this way, Holthaus's commitment is a break similar to Nietzsche's refusal of established morality. Holthaus broke away from a customary morality which limits thought and behavior by imposing regular behavior in the name of security. He notes three ways that his commitment unsettles secure routines: the discomfort of giving up forms of leisure dependent on long-distance travel; the potential loss of a job that requires one to fly; and the impact on the economy if many people were to dramatically curtail their flying habits or consumption in general.⁷⁴ Institutionalized comforts, vocations, comprehension, habit, and norms became de-actualized in Holthaus's intense moment of hopelessness.

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2436551/A-weatherman-breaks-tears-vows-NEVER-fly-grim-climate-change-report.html>

⁷² Holthaus, "Why I'm never flying again."

⁷³ Eric Berger, "Who is Eric Holthaus, and why did he give up flying today?," *SciGuy (blog), The Houston Chronicle*, September 27, 2013, <http://blog.chron.com/sciguy/2013/09/who-is-eric-holthaus-and-why-did-he-give-up-flying-today/>

⁷⁴ Holthaus, "Why I'm never flying again," and Holthaus, "I Spent 28 Hours on a Bus. I Loved It."

Yet this interruptive experience also spurred Holthaus to different actions that embodied the intensities of that emotional state. Sentiment organizes the play of intensities according to established moral codes, prejudicing behavior in favor of regularized sociality. Klossowski suggests that Nietzsche reorganized his own sentiments through producing simulacra as invented constellations of intensities. These simulacra imitate the intense experience of the event to reorganize sentiment. Perhaps Holthaus's commitment can be understood as a simulacrum that reproduces the event. That commitment continues to interrupt established ways of living, compelling him to reorganize his vacations, professional life, and activism.

Because Holthaus's transformation is lived, it also becomes part of the experience of those in contact with him. Holthaus's friends, relatives, and professional associates have to consider reorganizing their lives to adapt to his commitment. He also pushed a broader group of people to confront climate change. This can be seen in the responses to Holthaus's twitter announcement. Some people expressed support or admiration; others felt compelled to make pledges to cut their carbon footprint. Yet others expressed disdain, suggesting that Holthaus was a "beta male" or that he should commit suicide.⁷⁵ Other climate writers suggested that his emotional reaction had compromised his professionalism and objectivity, or that he was overreacting to the IPCC report.⁷⁶ Klossowski notes a similar effect when Nietzsche tried to tell his friends about the Eternal Return. They failed to see a connection between the idea and the affect. In the same way that Nietzsche invited his friends to think and feel with him, Holthaus invites us to feel the disruption he felt. Yet the most common

⁷⁵ Holthaus, "I Spent 28 Hours on a Bus. I Loved It."

⁷⁶ Jason Samenow, "Meteorologist Eric Holthaus' vow to never to fly again draws praise, criticism," *Capital Weather Gang (blog)*, *Washington Post*, October 1, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/capital-weather-gang/wp/2013/10/01/meteorologist-eric-holthaus-vow-to-never-to-fly-again-draws-praise-criticism/>.

response was to refuse that invitation and to suppress the disruption by affirming established morality. An isolated individual emotional experience is nonetheless able to effectively extend itself into institutionalized life, embodying the event as a way to disrupt and reorganize those institutions.

One thing that this suggests is that we may be able to better understand our relation to climate change by looking at how Holthaus's declaration makes us feel. Amidst various affirmations and resistances to Holthaus, only some were able to take that truth and implement it in their own lives, making commitments to reduce their carbon footprint and become more politically involved. Whether our own organization of sentiment leads us to feel joy or anger at Holthaus's commitment does not matter if either functions to purge interruptive discomfort of climate change. While it is good to have more scientific information about climate change, we also need to attend to the way that awareness gets taken up in our bodies, sentiments, and spirits.

Drive and Experiment

How events reveal the world of impulses that feed into experience in Nietzsche's thought is worked through by Bataille⁷⁷ in a different way than Klossowski. Yet both focus on these events as extreme states tending toward the complete dissolution of the subject. But Nietzsche also attends to the drives in a more subtle way. Focusing on everyday experience, he examines drives, habits, particular circumstances, individual characters, customs, emotions, and dispositions, finding within them potential sites of experimenting with life.

Nietzsche reveals the overlooked depth of everyday life in a section of *Daybreak* entitled "Experience and invention." "However far a man may go in self-knowledge, nothing

⁷⁷ Georges Bataille, *On Nietzsche*. trans. Bruce Boone (London: Continuum, 1992).

however can be more incomplete than his image of the totality of *drives* which constitute his being. He can scarcely name even the cruder ones: their number and strength, their ebb and flood, their play and counterplay among one another and above all the laws of their *nutriment* remain wholly unknown to him.”⁷⁸ People rarely think about the structure of their experience, and even when they do, they lack the resources to account for it: the number of drives, what each drive actually is, the internal movements of each drive, their movements in relation to each other, their relations to outside forces, and the way that the world resolves itself into individual experience through this complex interplay. This interplay is not a matter of the strongest or most hungry drive triumphing. Rather, it is “a work of chance: our daily experiences throw some prey in the way of now this, now that drive, and the drive seizes it eagerly; but the coming and going of these events as a whole stands in no rational relationship to the nutritional requirements of the totality of the drives.”⁷⁹ The satisfaction of the drive can mean many things: it “desires gratification—or exercise of its strength, or discharge of its strength, or the saturation of an emptiness—these are all metaphors.”⁸⁰ The problem of the drives is not epistemological, but ontological: there is no rational or systematic way in which the interplay of drives occurs. The tumult of this interplay is periodically fueled by the events of our lives. The satisfaction of one drive through a particular event does not produce a harmonious state, but a different configuration of feeling and intensity. This is why Nietzsche sees it as a matter of chance.

Even a simple and banal experience is caught up in and configured through the chance play of these drives that seize upon it.

Take some trifling experience. Suppose we were in the market place one day and we noticed someone laughing at us as we went by: this event will signify this or that to us according to

⁷⁸ Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, 74.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

whether this or that drive happens at that moment to be at its height in us – and it will be a quite different event according to the kind of person we are. One person will absorb it like a drop of rain, another will shake it from him like an insect, another will try to pick a quarrel, another will examine his clothing to see if there is anything about it that might give rise to laughter, another will be led to reflect on the nature of laughter as such, another will be glad to have involuntarily augmented the amount of cheerfulness and sunshine in the world – and in each case a drive has gratified itself, whether it be the drive to annoyance or to combativeness or to reflection or to benevolence.⁸¹

We can easily imagine and connect to this trivial occurrence, yet we do not attend to such things in our own lives. This minor event shows how experience is modified both by the particular mixture of drives in a personality as well as the momentary configuration of the mixture within that person. This is not just ‘interpretation’ since the event only takes its final form through the drives that resolve it. Nietzsche thereby calls us to work beyond what we normally take to be experience and focus on the drives that shape it.

Though it may be possible to recognize after the fact which drives played critical roles in shaping an experience, many drives and external elements feed into it in subtle ways. These nuances can be seen in Nietzsche's understanding of dreams, which “are interpretations of nervous stimuli we receive while we are asleep, *very free*, very arbitrary interpretations of the motions of the blood and intestines, of the pressure of the arm and the bedclothes, of the sounds made by church bells, weathercocks, night-revellers and other things of the kind.”⁸² An event is not just one thing such as a person laughing, but a configuration of different influences at a given moment. Nietzsche considers the number of influences to be quite high, even including the influence of the pressure that bedclothes have on experience.

Nietzsche also extends the influence of the drives upward into the higher levels of cognition. “Do I have to add that when we are awake our drives likewise do nothing but

⁸¹ Ibid., 76.

⁸² Ibid., 75.

interpret nervous stimuli...that our moral judgments and evaluations too are only images and fantasies based on a physiological process unknown to us, a kind of acquired language for designating certain nervous stimuli? That all our so-called consciousness is a more or less fantastic commentary on an unknown, perhaps unknowable, but felt text?"⁸³ The drives connect the body, memory, routines, spirit, illness, judgment, weather and expectations, taking up the world in a particular way, and making some parts of it more meaningful, ignoring some parts, transfiguring others, and adding some elements of their own. Nietzsche sees the everyday event as a diffuse occurrence drawing on sources both inside and outside the subject. Experience is thus constituted by an indeterminable co-mingling and inter-fusion of drives with the world. It does not create another world, but is a partial and differential participation in it. A greater part of the world is felt than experienced because the higher faculties overcode feeling in ways that make sense of the world, attribute simple causality or arbitrariness to it, establish moral evaluations of it, serve as predictive evaluations of it and so on. Cognition can also help locate the self as a node of feeling and experience that Nietzsche is interested in examining, understanding, critiquing, and changing. "What then are our experiences? Much *more* that which we put into them than that which they already contain! Or must we go far as to say: in themselves they contain nothing: To experience is to invent?"⁸⁴

In order to participate in the invention of experience, however, Nietzsche has to go beyond the individual. Drives are not limited to the self, but are social and historical as well. Nietzsche prescribes a historical investigation of the drives to anyone wishing to understand existence. "All kinds of passions have to be thought through separately, pursued separately through ages, people, great and small individuals; their entire reason and all their evaluations

⁸³ Ibid., 75-6.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

and modes of illuminating things must be revealed! So far, all that has given colour to existence still lacks a history: where could you find a history of love, of avarice, of envy, of conscience, of piety, of cruelty...To observe how differently the human drives have grown and still could grow depending on the moral climate....”⁸⁵ This is a condensed version of what Nietzsche suggests; his list of things to examine is four times longer and implies even more. Individual drives are not simply blind impulses; they contain purposes rooted in the moral climate in which they exist and the history from which they come. Thus they are inseparable from the social and political. On one hand this project is a critique of established moral judgments and rational justifications, but it also implies a further project of transformation.

Having understood the importance of the drives, where they come from, how they operate, and how they influence existence, it becomes possible to think about trying to shape the drives themselves. Nietzsche concludes that the last step in the project of researching the drives would be to see “[w]hether science is able to *furnish* goals of action after having proved that it can take such goals away and annihilate them; and then an experimenting would be in order.”⁸⁶ Nietzsche undermines the legitimacy of established moral objectives by showing them to be cultural, historical, affective, and changing. But he also turns this around to ask what future modes of being are possible if we actively draw on this open-endedness. How might consciousness and experience actively feed back into the constitution of the drives? What emerges is a project of experimentation. Experimentation works on the unknown but indirectly observable composition of the drives. Indeed, their nature is such that even knowing a future event would not be enough to control the influence of the drives,

⁸⁵ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 34.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

for that knowledge itself may change their composition.⁸⁷ But rather than being a reason to pass over the drives, their shifting relation to consciousness makes them fertile ground for reshaping human experience through experimentation.

But to what end? Is this not a planned set of experiments for human betterment? Is there behind it a demand for teleological progress in the sense of simple finality? Is this not just a new religion of the experiment? No. The concern is how experience is constituted now and how it might be constituted next. This assumes that humans have lived in many other ways before and that they will live in yet other ways in the future. Nietzsche calls our world a “moral interregnum.” “So it is that, according to our taste and talent, we live an existence which is either a *prelude* or a *postlude*, and the best we can do in this *interregnum* is to be as far as possible our own *reges* and found little *experimental states*. We are experiments: let us also want to be them!”⁸⁸ Experimentation instantiates a between-period. It does not establish a moral order, but explores the possibilities of morality and existence.

It is neither possible nor preferable to say which moral order may emerge in the future. For the time being, the goal is to investigate the relation between knowledge and experience. “The thought that life could be an experiment for the knowledge-seeker – not a duty, not a disaster, not a deception! And knowledge itself: let it be something else to others, like a bed to rest on or the way to one, or a diversion or a form of idleness; to me it is a world of dangers and victories in which heroic feelings also have their dance- and playgrounds. ‘*Life as a means to knowledge*’ – with this principle in one’s heart one can not only live bravely but also *live gaily and laugh gaily!*”⁸⁹ Experimentation becomes immanent to

⁸⁷ *Daybreak*, 76.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 190-191.

⁸⁹ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 181.

experience and itself.⁹⁰ In this situation each experiment reshapes experience in such a way that it produces the possibility for further experimentation. A person might interrupt their academic work in order to build a Heideggerian dwelling and see how their activity branches out from there. Someone who normally drives, uses a cellphone, or watches television could try going a period of time without one of them. Yet another person might try regularly listening to classical music, taking up an exercise routine, cycling, vegetarianism, joining a community organization, learning another language, sobriety, or regularly reading a newspaper. One gains knowledge by carrying out experiments on and throughout their life. The experiments are rigorous but not necessary; risky but not disastrous. The transcendence of a particular moral vision impelling life is transfigured into a disposition of affirmation and laughter. Failures, resistances, and frustrations do not consume the experimenter, but become interesting challenges or puzzles.

One of Nietzsche's most important formulations of this experimental disposition is his notion of brief habits. "I love brief habits and consider them invaluable means for getting to know *many* things and states down to the bottom of their sweetnesses and bitternesses...I always believe *this* will give me lasting satisfaction – even brief habits have this faith of passion, this faith in eternity – and that I am to be envied for having found and recognized it, and now it nourishes me at noon and in the evening and spreads a deep contentment around itself and into me, so that I desire nothing else, without having to compare, despise, or hate."⁹¹ Each new habit not only teaches Nietzsche something new, but it helps him understand the states that that particular habit brings about in him. He takes up each habit with rigor and faith as though it would be eternal, making each new habit meaningful. None

⁹⁰ William E. Connolly, "Experience and Experiment," in *Daedalus*, 135:3 (2006): 67-75. See also William E. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), postlude.

⁹¹ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 167.

of the habits provides a moral justification for existence, yet at the same time his interest in each of them is intense enough that he draws existential nourishment from it.

It is not just a matter of the particular experiments or habits, but also the experimental disposition itself. Nietzsche continues:

And one day [the habit's] time is up; the good thing parts from me, not as something that now disgusts me but peacefully and sated with me, as I with it, and as if we ought to be grateful to each other and so shake hands to say farewell. And already the new waits at the door along with my faith – the indestructible fool and sage! - that this new thing will be the right thing, the last right thing. This happens to me with dishes, thoughts, people, cities, poems, music, doctrines, daily schedules, and ways of living. *Enduring* habits, however, I hate, and feel as if a tyrant has come near me and the air around me is *thickening* when events take a shape that seems inevitably to produce enduring habits – for instance, owing to an official position, constant relations with the same people, a permanent residence, or uniquely good health.⁹²

Despite the passion with which Nietzsche commits to each habit in order to explore it, he does not resent either its failure to be an answer or its passing: he is content with the knowledge and experience gained. At the same time, he undergoes a transfiguration, treating each habit as if it were a justification for existence. But each time that he gives one up and takes another, he reconfigures his experience and drives. Insofar as each habit could be a solution to life, each habit brings with it a different kind of existence for the experimenter. This is the eventful aspect of experimentation: the way that a person undergoes a transformation of their constitution. To continually do so requires an experimental disposition that fully commits to each way of life, tries many of them, and leaves each cheerfully behind. The experimental disposition also helps Nietzsche guard against enduring habits or permanent modes of life that seek to creep in and establish a permanent moral justification for existence.

In another experimental mode, Nietzsche suggests thinking about it as an undertaking in which one should “give style' to one's character.” “Here a great mass of

⁹² Ibid., 167-68.

second nature has been added; there a piece of first nature removed – both times through long practice and daily work at it.”⁹³ The “first” nature is not more fundamental or essential than the second; each part of our constitution can be reshaped, augmented, removed, or refined. In this instance Nietzsche emphasizes practice and continual effort rather than existential commitment as he did in the case of habits. In each case the goal is to experiment with the self to see what it might become, more than to know those drives that precede and infuse consciousness.

Yet it is important to remember that even while actively conducting these experiments, it is not consciousness that guides the outcome but the drives. “Something you formerly loved as a truth or a probability now strikes you as an error; you cast it off and believe your reason has made a victory. But maybe that error was as necessary for you then, when you were still another person – you are always another person – as are all your present 'truths'...When we criticize, we are not doing something arbitrary and impersonal; it is, at least very often, proof that there are living, active forces within us shedding skin.”⁹⁴ As with brief habits, when the existential justifications that support the self change, so does the person. In deliberately carrying out experiments to shape and transform the self, it may seem that the control of reason over the drives is growing. Nietzsche doubts this. The way that the drives and reason run together to constitute the self means that any new realization for reason is always part of a change in the drives. What might emerge, however, is a greater sensitivity to the movements in the self, an experimental disposition that is able to resist the call of transcendence, commit to unknown changes, and a joy that infuses this process.

This disposition is needed to overcome the problems that experimentation faces. In resonance with the dangers of the evening disposition and ossified myths, Nietzsche is

⁹³ Ibid., 163-4.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 174-5.

concerned that the disposition against becoming may frustrate experimentation upon the drives. “There is their lack of historical sense, their hatred of even the idea of becoming...Death, change, age, as well as procreation and growth, are for them objections – refutations even. What is, does not *become*; what becomes, *is* not.”⁹⁵ As one begins to experiment with the drives, consciousness encounters slippage, transitoriness, and becoming. Feelings, sensations, and drives against this instability can feed into a preference for the stable morality of reason. The drive toward stability and secure knowledge comes forth: “Now they all believe, even to the point of despair, in that which is. But since they cannot get hold of it, they look for reasons why it is being withheld from them...These senses, *which are so immoral as well*, it is they which deceive us about the *real* world. Moral: escape from sense-deception, from becoming, from history, from falsehood – history is nothing but belief in the senses, belief in falsehood.”⁹⁶ Nietzsche worries that consciousness may find itself unable to understand the world as deeply as it might like to. The element of flow in the world does not conform to systematization and thus must be false, the systematizers say. At this moment, the predisposition against becoming and for 'reason' steps in to explain the world. This produces a 'real' world in opposition to the one which is experienced. But the part of the world resolved as consciousness through the drives is the reality of experience. In fact, it is suppressing the drives and insisting upon a particular image of the world that produces a false image of existence.

Nietzsche further points to the drive for causal determinism as a source of resistance to the experimentation that he pursues.

To trace something unknown back to something known is alleviating, soothing, gratifying and gives moreover a feeling of power. Danger, disquiet, anxiety attend the unknown – the first instinct is to *eliminate* these distressing states...The cause-creating drive is thus

⁹⁵ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 45.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

conditioned and excited by the feeling of fear. The question 'why?' should furnish, if at all possible, not so much the cause for its own sake as a *certain kind of cause* – a soothing, liberating, alleviating cause. That something already *known*, experienced, inscribed in the memory is posited as cause is the first consequence of this need. The new, the unexperienced, the strange is excluded from being cause.⁹⁷

As Nietzsche points out, the way that the drives interact with consciousness and the world undermines secure causal claims. This very experience is accompanied by anxiety which in turn pushes a response that seeks to allay that anxiety by positing a known cause. The drives may be organized such that this satisfaction is more influential than the experimental drive to allow the experience to play out in order to see the effects. It is not just a matter of overcoming the impulse to subordinate experience to reason, the problem is also to negotiate predispositions that mobilize fear, anxiety and comfort in such a way that experimentation becomes an uncomfortable process.

To help overcome these problems, Nietzsche proposes counter-images such as the image of an open whole that serves as a point of attachment free of an overbearing moral view. “*No one* is accountable for existing at all, or for being constituted as he is, or for living in the circumstances and surroundings in which he lives...He is *not* the result of a special design, a will, a purpose...it is absurd to want to *hand over* his nature to some purpose or other...One is necessary, one is a piece of fate, one belongs to the whole, one *is* in the whole – there exists nothing which could judge, measure, compare, condemn our being.”⁹⁸ What does thinking through existence in terms of the whole do? First, it shows how experience is tied to the world rather than being a distorting falsity. Second, it trades the concepts of will and causality for that of becoming. If humans are part of a becoming world, then neither they nor any other cause can be isolated as a singular, durable and self-sufficient center of organization. Third, necessity and fate replace a world teleologically constructed around

⁹⁷ Ibid., 62.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 65.

humans. Here, fate and necessity mean that experience is what is real and that another world, specifically one based on humans, cannot be posited in its place to 'correct' experience.

There is no external measure by which to judge what occurs, but rather, experience judges itself. This view favors provisional judgments and continued experimentation. As Nietzsche puts it, “when we speak of values we do so under the inspiration and from the perspective of life: life itself evaluates through us *when* we establish values.”⁹⁹ This is not a completely worked out framework to follow. It is a condition to begin experimenting.

Becoming gods: Man, the Death of God, and the Anthropocene

Zarathustra tells us: “The greatest events – they are not our noisiest but our stillest hours. The world revolves, not around the inventors of new noises, but around the inventors of new values; it revolves *inaudibly*.”¹⁰⁰ Great events build quietly and occur over a longer period of time. The changes they bring about are explosive, but the way they occur is not. They shape epochs, values, and ways of existing; people may dramatically alter their behavior in anticipation of them or miss them entirely; these events carry a great weight, perhaps as heavy as that of Nature or God; they occur on a timescale that can be difficult to perceive and understand; they are beyond the control of an individual, group, or nation.

Understanding a great event is a matter of sounding it out, through which one also sounds out their relation to the event. This can be seen in Nietzsche's handling of the event of the human and the death of God.

One way to begin thinking about how great events reorient thought is to start with the historical evolution of drives discussed in the previous section. Nietzsche considers this in a different light in a section of *The Gay Science* entitled “Our eruptions,” Nietzsche writes:

⁹⁹ Ibid., 55.

¹⁰⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 153-4.

“Countless things that humanity acquired in earlier stages, but so feebly and embryonically that no one could tell that they had been acquired, suddenly emerge into the light much later, perhaps after centuries; meanwhile they have become strong and ripe. Some ages seem to lack completely some talent or virtue, just as some people do...All of us harbour in ourselves hidden gardens and plantations; and, to use another metaphor, we are all growing volcanoes approaching their hour of eruption.”¹⁰¹ Working on an extended human timescale, Nietzsche points to events that take centuries to arise within a culture and specific individual traits that have been building for generations. In all of these cases a single human life is not on a timescale equal to that of the event. Yet each of us is part of accumulating events. Such events can be difficult to understand and influence not only because they play out beyond the time of the individual, but also because they are themselves unpredictable. One cannot say how many tributaries flow into such events, how long they have been growing, or what pressures will allow them to emerge. Understanding such events and how they shape life requires adopting a different temporal orientation which moves beyond the individual human.

Nietzsche assigns the task of “learning solitude” to those who want to begin to think beyond the frame of human influence. “O you poor devils in the great cities of world politics, you gifted young men tormented by ambition who consider it your duty to pass some comment on everything that happens...However much they may desire to do great work, the profound speechlessness of pregnancy never comes to them! The event of the day drives them before it like chaff, while they think they are driving the event.”¹⁰² Superficial alertness is an obstacle to engaging great events. It reduces the event to an extension of the ability of the individual, rather than recognizing the ways that the event overflows it. Indeed,

¹⁰¹ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 36.

¹⁰² Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, 107. Translation modified.

Zarathustra argues that great events are silent while the noise that masquerades as influence actually obscures them. In desperately seeking to have an effect, those bent on exercising their will miss the event and are even driven by it. Their judgments and actions do not influence the event, but are symptoms of it. Great events emerge from cultural and historical embeddedness, not as the project of an independent actor or isolated force. To be able to influence great events, politics may have to become silent, learning how to listen and exist in solitude beyond the individual's time and place.

This raises a troubling question about the climate change event. Certainly the oil industry and their lobbyists are heard and have effects. But what about politicians and capitalists who see government responses as a traction point for pushing their anti-regulation program? What about those who see the event as an opportunity to expand militaristic controls inside and outside the state? How might we rethink someone like Al Gore's influence on the issue? In what ways do we limit our understanding of the climate event by seeing it only as an effect of oil companies, or even human carbon consumption?

Turning away from noisy and deterministic visions of the event, these questions may be clarified through Nietzsche's suggestion to learn silence as a way of sounding out the event of the human. In a section entitled "In the great silence," Nietzsche describes the experience of being away from the city and by the sea at twilight as everything falls silent. Bit by bit, one realizes how silent everything is, how it does not speak: first the sea, then the sky, then the cliffs. Yet one feels a malice in this silence.

Ah, it is growing yet more still, my heart swells again: it is startled by a new truth, *it too cannot speak*, it too mocks when the mouth calls something into this beauty, it too enjoys its sweet silent malice. I begin to hate speech to hate even thinking; for do I not hear behind every word the laughter of error, of imagination, of the spirit of delusion? Must I not mock at my pity? Mock at my mockery? - O sea, O evening! You are evil instructors! You teach man to

cease to be man! Shall he surrender to you? Shall he become as you now are, pale, glittering, mute, tremendous, reposing above himself?¹⁰³

A silent nature seems to be malicious, pitying and mocking humans in its silence. But seeing nature as malicious and hating speech is an expression of *ressentiment* against nature for not conforming to an all too human concept of its shape. Humans are invested in speaking, thinking and producing truths and yet this silence shows they do not matter to nature. Even reverence for the beauty of nature does not matter to nature. Though humans are part of nature, nature calls the human into question. It can “teach man to cease to be man.” Silence is what there was before there were humans and what there will be after humans are gone. This notion of silence does not escape the human perspective. Rather, it tries to carry us to the limit of our human-centered views in order to think about our own conditions of possibility. This is what Nietzsche refers to as the “speechlessness of pregnancy.” Learning silence both broadens the human perspective and clarifies it. In this way we come to better understand and appreciate the contours of the event of the human.

Nietzsche begins his essay “On Truth and Falsity in their Ultramoral Sense” with one version of the event of the human, outlined in stark imagery.

In some remote corner of the universe, effused into innumerable solar-systems, there was once a star upon which clever animals invented cognition. It was the haughtiest, most mendacious moment in the history of this world, but yet only a moment. After Nature had taken breath awhile the star congealed and the clever animals had to die.—Someone might write a fable after this style, and yet he would not have illustrated sufficiently, how wretched, shadow-like, transitory, purposeless and fanciful the human intellect appears in Nature.¹⁰⁴

On a cosmic timescale, the birth and death of humanity as a great event takes only a few of Nature's breaths. Even the lifespan of the planet is short. This species endeavor with the intellect at its center is contained within one cosmic event among many. So far, Nietzsche

¹⁰³ Ibid., 181.

¹⁰⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Falsity in their Ultramoral Sense.” in *Early Greek Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge (Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1911), 173.

thinks humans have adopted two responses to being situated in nature in this way. The first is the attempt to establish stability and truth through language, concepts, and science so that a dangerous and unstable nature can be met with “foresight, prudence, [and] regularity.”¹⁰⁵ This way of life tries to account for those views outside the human by focusing on the laws that structure existence and the cosmos, and thus are common to everything. The problem with this view is that it refuses the event of the human, instead explicating nature through a particular human ordering of it. The false opposition that this establishes between humans and nature will collapse when humanity disappears in a cosmic puff.

Nietzsche prefers a more artistic response that “constantly shows its passionate longing for shaping the existing world of waking man as motley, irregular, inconsequentially incoherent, attractive, and eternally new as the world of dreams is.”¹⁰⁶ Rather than looking for a reason that justifies existence and secures the human place within it, this way of life embraces the arbitrariness of the world. Instead of building an edifice of laws and knowledge, humans create according to their sense, whim, and intellect such that “everything is possible; and all nature swarms around man as if she were nothing but the masquerade of the gods.”¹⁰⁷ Rejecting views that see nature as an object to be studied or an external threat to human life, Nietzsche argues that humans should joyfully take up their limits and possibilities. The arbitrary threat of human extinction is transfigured into a contradictory confluence of partially-defined human projects and expressions. An image of a world this beautiful is one that Nietzsche can fall in love with.

Out of this confluence of human activity, great events also emerge. The one that concerns Nietzsche the most is the death of God. He lived in the midst of this occurring but

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 190.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 188.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 189.

not yet heard event. “This tremendous event is still on its way, wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men.”¹⁰⁸ It has long been growing but is still hard to perceive, react to, and understand. Because of this elusive but momentous character, one cannot simply understand and accept such an event. Nietzsche's madman refuses the blasé view of the atheists around him, trying to make them feel the significance and uncertainty brought on by the death of God. “We are all his murderers. But how did we do this?...What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling?...With what water could we clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what holy games will we have to invent for ourselves? Is the magnitude of this deed not too great for us? Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it?”¹⁰⁹ Even though we participate in and express the great event, we may be lost within it. Nonetheless, we need to try to respond. Nietzsche asks: is it possible to cleanse ourselves of such events, simply leaving them behind? Is it desirable to do so? What new rituals, habits, ways of life and worship will we have to invent? How will we have to reinvent ourselves? What would it mean to have to become a god? What burdens would have to be taken up? Is this not the problem today with climate change? Simply accepting the scientific understanding of it is not enough. It entails dramatic changes to our existence, and Nietzsche suspects that we are generally unprepared to think about, let alone make, such changes.

To respond to such events, Nietzsche suggests developing a positive disposition that transforms elements of uncertainty and directionlessness into an opportunity to think and change. Then, the immediate consequences of the event become “like a new and barely describable type of light, happiness, relief, amusement, encouragement, dawn...Indeed, at

¹⁰⁸ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 120.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

hearing the news that 'the old god is dead', we philosophers and 'free spirits' feel illuminated by a new dawn; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, forebodings, expectation – finally the horizon seems clear again, even if not bright.”¹¹⁰ A spirituality is required which excites us for something new. Rather than resenting change, it should be taken up with curiosity and energy. Faced with upheaval and an uncertain future, fear and foreboding remain. But Nietzsche wants to draw encouragement from the event for inventing and discovery.

It is not just a question of developing a new feeling for uncertainty, but of the ethos of responsiveness adopted toward such dramatic changes. Nietzsche asks: “What do you know in advance about the character of existence to be able to decide whether the greater advantage is on the side of the unconditionally distrustful or of the unconditionally trusting?”¹¹¹ A positive take on the changes that the great event brings is not necessarily a trusting one. Nietzsche thinks that a fair measure of mistrust is also required. But great events audit our relation to the world. They put us into a state of questioning and can push us to critically confront the values we have lived and accorded to things. Here is the audit that Nietzsche gives during the death of God: “...the way of the world is not at all divine – even by human standards it is not rational, merciful, or just. We know it: the world we live in is ungodly, immoral, 'inhuman'...We take care not to claim that the world is worth *less*; indeed, it would seem laughable to us today if man were to aim at inventing values that were supposed to *surpass* the value of the real world.”¹¹² Nietzsche is skeptical about our ability to remove all of our valuations that surpass the world, but he does think that many of us may be able to get rid of the worst of them. Realizing that God is dead enables us to drop a

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 199.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 200.

¹¹² Ibid., 204.

number of demands which will always go unfulfilled. Doing so also removes a source of *ressentiment* against life. It is not a question of the hardships the world places upon us or of the existential comfort which it denies us. Rather, it is a matter of the values we have produced that distort existence and our expectations of it too much, even as they may seem to make life more comfortable in other select ways. For Nietzsche, such myths are unhelpful: he prefers those that beautify the sublime and tragic dimensions of this world rather than those that “beautify” worldly existence in the name of something fundamentally “better.” This is an ethos oriented toward the changes brought about by an event.

Caught in the “broken time of transition,”¹¹³ those who have developed a positive ethos of the event find the comforting ideals of stability unappealing because they expect things to continue to change. From this position they can participate in and shape the event. “The ice that still supports people today has already grown very thin; the wind that brings a thaw is blowing; we ourselves, we homeless ones, are something that breaks up the ice and other all too thin 'realities!'”¹¹⁴ The freer disposition of those who accept the homelessness of the event propel it along. They are not passively dragged along by it, nor do they cling to that which it alters. Rather, they take up the current of the event as their own, pushing past that which is on its way out and developing that which is nascent. This is affirmation for Nietzsche. “The hidden Yes in you is stronger than all Nos and Maybes that afflict you and your age like a disease; and you must sail the seas, you emigrants, you too are compelled to this by – a *faith!*”¹¹⁵ The affirming “Yes” of the emigrant brings Nietzsche into connection with Kierkegaard, since it is affirmed through faith. Lost and homeless in the world, faith supplies connection to and energy for the changed conditions that the event brings about.

¹¹³ Ibid., 241.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 243.

But whereas for Kierkegaard, we are changed by having unwavering faith in the divine event that comes into the world, for Nietzsche, it is a more sporadic faith that brings us to participate in our own change and in that of the world. Just as habits that are taken up as 'the answer' are temporary, so too is faith.

Nietzsche argues against events modeled on revolution, which attach idealized hopes to unachievable outcomes over a very short period of time. He is skeptical that much real change comes out of such a situation. Rather, he prefers slow yet profound change.

If a change is to be as profound as it can be, the means to it must be given in the smallest doses but unremittingly over long periods of time! Can what is great be created at a *single stroke*? So let us take care not to exchange the state of morality to which we are accustomed for a new evaluation of things head over heels and amid acts of violence – no, let us continue to live in it for a long, long time yet – until, probably a long while hence, we become aware that *the new evaluation* has acquired predominance within us and that the little doses of it *to which we must from now on accustom ourselves* have laid down a new nature in us.¹¹⁶

Just as the great event accumulates momentum for change gradually and over a long period of time, so might we bring about the greatest change with minor alterations carried out steadily over many years. Change is not forced with violence, but brought about insistently, patiently and thoroughly so that one no longer feels their formerly intuitive attachments. Nietzsche argues that it is not simply a matter of bringing about a change outside of us, but of a new nature being laid down within us. Not only do great events now and again reshape the world we live in, but they teach us how to reshape ourselves as well.

Though we may not have immediate or daily experience of the climate change event, we begin by refining our sensitivity to it. We might extend our consciousness to maintain a connection to geographically distant areas which are undergoing more intense climate effects than where we are. Thinking geologically draws the melting permafrost to our mind, as well as the large quantities of methane trapped within that will eventually be released under

¹¹⁶ Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, 211.

conditions of continued warming. We extend the frame of our daily consumption to consider the fossil fuels required to transport the goods we use. Time dilates. Shifting seasonal patterns disturb our memories and distort our expectations, producing uneasiness. Reading Nietzsche on the human event adjusts our view to a planetary or cosmic scale for a moment. An anthropocentric view is now harder to sustain at the same time that our sense of freedom and possibility for our own place is strengthened. Awareness of the effects of changes in temperature and ocean pH on other species intensifies understanding of the implications of climate change. We begin to give ourselves new tasks and experiments. We produce new simulacra, introducing new visions into the world that transfigure the way we approach it, channeling our expectations and energies in new directions. In all of this we move back and forth between attempts to change the composition of drives, changes in planetary conditions, and our sense of the human scale of new experiments and goals.

Chapter Three

Risk or Security? Decisiveness and the Event

Schmitt theorizes the event in the wake of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Schmitt does not expect God to intervene in the world anymore, but locates a similar interruptive force in sovereign decisions. The sovereign is a secularized God and Kierkegaard's faith an act of obedience. But even God's moral order no longer guides action. Without a God who founds and maintains order, that task now falls to humans, who no longer have any divine constraints on their actions.¹ Thus Schmitt's event tends toward political exceptions in which arbitrary decisions are made in an attempt to instate order by any means necessary.

Aside from being a theorist of political events, Carl Schmitt had personal experience with them: "As a witness to some of the most decisive events in German history, Schmitt experienced the collapse of the monarchy in 1918, the turmoil of the Weimar Republic, the Nazi dictatorship, and the creation of the Federal Republic."² The collapses and creations of these political orders do not encompass Schmitt's experience, which would also have to include Schmitt's role in administering martial law in Munich in the last years of the monarchy, his decision to remain in Germany after Hitler had come to power, the personal threat he felt in the wake of the Night of the Long Knives, a public campaign against him by the Nazi secret service, and his trial at Nuremberg after more than a year in an internment camp. These experiences seem not to have increased his spiritual resolve to engage the event. What this might mean and its implications for his theory will be discussed throughout this chapter.

¹ For more on this characteristic as the basis of modern conservatism, see Slavoj Žižek, "Carl Schmitt in the Age of Post-Politics," *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Verso, 1999), 18-9.

² Joseph W. Bendersky, *Carl Schmitt: Theorist for the Reich* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), ix.

It can reasonably be asked: why Schmitt? Indeed, Adam Sitze's review of Carlo Galli's largely untranslated work on Schmitt is titled "A Farewell to Schmitt"³ for good reason. First, Galli's 936-page *Genealogy of Politics: Carl Schmitt and the Crisis of Modern Political Thought* is "the most complete, comprehensive, and insightful account of Schmitt's thought ever published."⁴ Such an account likely precludes many attempts to deepen scholarship on Schmitt. Second, whereas most Schmitt scholarship gets caught in the problematic of polemically reviving Schmitt, "Galli enables us *to enter into conflict with Schmitt's writings* in a way that does not also *revive or resurrect Schmitt's writings on conflict*."⁵ Finally, the crisis to which Schmitt's thought responded may have deepened and transformed in such a way that exhausts the usefulness of Schmittian categories and analyses.⁶

These claims raise problems for a new analysis of Schmitt's thought. There are two grounds on which I can nonetheless proceed. First, while it may be the case that the relevance of Schmittian thought has been eroded, particularly with respect to economic globalization, I do not think it has been exhausted. Many populations are living under emergency law today. In addition, climate change will produce intensifications and new situations where Schmittian thought might be applied. Harold Welzer's *Climate Wars* thoroughly analyzes some of these uncomfortable possibilities. In fact, as will be discussed in more detail in chapter five, the United States military is developing new emergency measures to respond to climate change. Finally, in his 2013 Gifford Lectures Bruno Latour gives a

³ Adam Sitze, "A Farewell to Schmitt: Notes on the Work of Carlo Galli," *The New Centennial Review* Vol 10 Nr 2 (Fall 2010): 27-72. I will refer to Galli and his thought through Sitze, since much of his work on Schmitt, in particular his 1996 book, is remains untranslated from the Italian.

⁴ Thalín Zarmanian "Carl Schmitt and the Problem of Legal Order: From Domestic to International," cited in Sitze, "A Farewell to Schmitt," 27.

⁵ Sitze, "Farewell to Schmitt," 58.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 62-66.

provocative reading of *Nomos of the Earth* to suggest a new relation of enmity between the Earthbound and the Humans, oriented around climate change.⁷

Second, as Sitze admits, there are “other ways besides immanent critique to appropriate Schmitt's writings within the horizon of emancipatory thought.”⁸ The critical appropriation pursued here has two parts. First, to engage in a close reading of Schmitt, identifying what William E. Connolly calls a flashpoint “at which key existential investments enter the complex, sometimes unconsciously and sometimes as a juncture treated by the theorist as an undeniable starting point.”⁹ Through Schmitt’s disposition toward security over risk, his theory becomes subservient to his personal politics, though it can also be developed in other ways. Thus I will read Schmitt against himself in order to suggest more emancipatory responses to political events. Second, to analyze the ethos that infuses Schmitt's work in order to identify its limitations.

The first section takes Michael Marder's work as a starting point for conceptualizing political events in Schmitt. His crucial insight is that the political does not have its own domain but rather operates as an intensity that transforms other domains, pushing them to new configurations through events. I take this insight further by placing it in the context of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the machine. This concept aids in reading Schmitt against himself by emphasizing the reworking of individual and collective desires by a political machine. Sometimes this reworking subordinates social goals to existing modes of organization but at other times it produces new political configurations.

⁷ Bruno Latour. “War of the Worlds: Humans against Earthbound.” *Gifford Lectures*. February 26, 2013. A version which Latour has requested not be quoted is available at <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/node/486>. Accessed June 6, 2014

⁸ Sitze, “Farewell to Schmitt,” 58.

⁹ William E. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things* (Durham: Duke, 2013), 99.

The second section uses the question “who decides?” to work against the tendency to place decisive power in the hands of a state or powerful leader. Instead, I draw on Schmitt's theory of the partisan to elucidate personal decisions that challenge an existing legal order. The key to partisan politics is to assume the risk of a position outside of formal politics.

The third section develops Schmitt's theory of political theology as a way of thinking that can orient partisan politics. It does this by focusing on political events as inevitable, risky, and existential. Such events do not have to be full suspensions of the legal system, but can manifest in perceptions, interpretations, and minor decisions. Nonetheless, the limits of Schmitt's theory of a decision can be clarified by comparing it to those of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

The final section looks at how, even though Schmitt is attentive to the fact that existential commitments infuse political analysis, his own political analysis diffuses attention to larger existential questions. Instead, I draw on the flashpoint in Schmitt's thought to indicate the ethos that pushed him in that direction. Against this ethos, I suggest that a broader one is necessary to motivate and sustain partisan politics.

The Political Event-Machine

In *Groundless Existence*, Michael Marder puts forward a thoughtful and compelling reading of Schmitt's theory of the event. He begins by pointing out that Schmitt's concept of the political does not have its own substance. As Schmitt says: “The political can derive its energy from the most varied human endeavors, from the religious, economic, moral, and other antitheses. It does not describe its own substance, but only the intensity of an

association or dissociation of human beings.”¹⁰ Marder sees in this an “unbounded versatility of the concept of the political,” through which the political transforms other domains. “Deprived of a playing field of its own, the concept reaches the heights of anti-foundationalism, as it shuns clear topographical distinctions, transgresses ontological boundaries, and, as a result, acquires that plasticity which nourishes its ability to dwell in and to transmogrify all other domains.”¹¹ Potentially inhabiting all other domains, the political manifests when tensions or antagonisms within one reach such a level of intensity that a relation of enmity emerges.¹² At this point the original character of the domain is superseded by the political as a mode of intensity. A political event is the moment when the political instantiates itself within another domain, transforming it in the process.

Marder’s insight is that Schmitt’s concept of the political can help us attend to political transformations which eliminate old modes of being and develop new ones: “In the process of renewal that adumbrates the living connection between the form and the content of politics, expropriation facilitates the 'emergence' and 'formation' of new unities (forms of political existence) and functions as the inalienable aspect of decision on the constitution as a whole.”¹³ While for Schmitt the political decision suspends the norm to preserve a way of life from a perceived threat, Marder turns that very suspension into a test of that way of life. For him, the groundlessness of the decision opens space for the emergence of new forms of political existence, despite the recalcitrance and inertia of outmoded forms. Marder thus

¹⁰ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 38.

¹¹ Michael Marder, *Groundless Existence: The Political Ontology of Carl Schmitt* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 62-3.

¹² Schmitt’s commentators tend to orient the political almost exclusively toward enmity. Schmitt, however, defines it more neutrally: “The distinction of friend and enemy denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation” (*Concept of the Political*, 26). Though he defines it in this way, his use also emphasizes the enemy. This tendency to focus on threats seems linked to Schmitt’s attachment to security, which will be developed throughout this chapter.

¹³ Marder, *Groundless Existence*, 79.

anchors his reading of the event as transformative in the groundlessness of the political:

“The point of the political, like the point of the decision that lies at its core, is an instant of the greatest risk, an experience of groundlessness.”¹⁴ Here, however, Marder conflates risk and groundlessness. While this ambiguity allows him to develop a provocative conceptual reading of the political, it also yields flat and potentially problematic understandings of risk and political transformation.

Marder initially distinguishes two types of risk, one taken by the sovereign, the other by the partisan. The former is “general risk,” which applies to a population under threat and is readily mobilized for a conservative politics of security. The latter is the “pregnant risk” of the partisan, who engages in extralegal political action without the hope of security.¹⁵ Marder later maintains this separation between sovereign and partisan risk,¹⁶ but immediately after reaffirming this distinction, he claims that:

In addition to the general theory of risk, the political configuration of decision-making calls for a more patient and meticulous ‘risk analysis.’...The sundering apart of the process and the act replicates the divergence of means from ends in the gradations of partisan risk and performs Kierkegaard’s ‘leap of faith,’ liberating itself from the discussions, deliberations, and calculations that prepare the ground for it....The decision remains incalculable, subjective, absolute, and, therefore, risky in the pregnant sense of the term regardless of the field of meticulous calculations from which it takes off.¹⁷

Though general and pregnant risk are qualitatively different, Marder argues that the groundlessness of the decision, embodied here in Kierkegaard’s leap of faith,¹⁸ is rooted in pregnant risk, whether that decision is made by a sovereign or a partisan.

¹⁴ Ibid., 67.

¹⁵ Ibid., 39-41.

¹⁶ Ibid., 54-55.

¹⁷ Ibid., 55.

¹⁸ Though metaphorically helpful, the comparison here is misleading. While Kierkegaard claims that the leap of faith is beyond calculation, it entails an entirely different type of decision about which one can never establish the success or correctness. Schmitt, on the other hand, believes that a decision can be correctly evaluated after the fact on the basis of competence.

This collapse of categories results from Marder reading the event in Schmitt through Derrida's *événement*. This is a notion of groundless expropriation which contains the reflexive autoimmunity to expropriate itself, in accordance with Schmitt's worry over the omnipresent possibility for the political to be depoliticized.¹⁹ As Marder contends, "The concept of the political is itself suicidal, in that, as a concept, it strives toward identity and reconciliation, negating the agonistic and uncompromising potentialities of the political which it, nevertheless, cannot erase."²⁰ While the tension contained in this striving for unachievable conceptual purity is productive for thinking about the political as an intensity that effectuates itself through other domains, it has limitations. Though Schmitt's concept of the political may be "suicidal," the decisions that he envisions are not so risky.

Marder overlooks the extent to which Schmitt slides from an analytical mode to a polemical one. A key area in which this occurs is the flashpoint between risk and security. Schmitt was concerned with his personal and professional security and his theory expresses this in the emphasis he puts on authority over horizontal movements, as well as on the role of the state in securing individual safety. He hoped for a state that could keep groundlessness and risk at bay, preserving the society to which he had become attached and in which he had made a name for himself. I will return to this flashpoint in the next section, after first sketching a reading of Schmitt's concept of the political based on the notion of the machine Deleuze and Guattari put forward in their book on Kafka.²¹ The machine offers an alternative to Derrida's notion of *événement* that attends to both the plasticity and open-endedness of Marder's reading as well as the different kinds of risk that feed into either

¹⁹ Marder, *Groundless Existence*, 61-2, 78-9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 78-9.

²¹ The pairing of Schmitt and Kafka is a strange, almost impossible one. The existential commitments that motivate *Political Theology* or *Concept of the Political*, for example, and those that motivate *The Trial* are perhaps irreconcilable. The problem of Schmitt's anti-Semitism and Kafka's Judaism is starker still. But if we are caught within Schmitt's theory of the political, that theory is also subject to the warping effects of our attempts to get hold of, use, misuse, and escape it.

conservative or emancipatory transformations. It does so by analyzing political events through “displacement”²² rather than groundlessness.

Like the political, a machine does not have a substance, but describes a process. Deleuze and Guattari argue that “A Kafka-machine is thus constituted by contents and expressions that have been formalized to diverse degrees by unformed materials that enter into it, and leave by passing through all possible states. To enter or leave the machine, to be in the machine, to walk around it, to approach it – these are all still components of the machine itself: these are states of desire, free of all interpretation....Desire is not form, but a procedure, a process.”²³ Not having its own substance, a machine is constituted by a combination of desires in the social field and connections to other such machines of desire. Even if desires are not “inside” the political machine, they are always connected to it “because desire never stops making a machine in the machine and creates a new gear alongside the preceding gear, indefinitely, even if the gears seem to be in opposition or seem to be functioning in a discordant fashion.”²⁴ Individuals are part of the machine in their political and social investments, “but even more so in their adjacent activities, in their leisure, in their loves, in their protestations, in their indignations, and so on.”²⁵ In Schmitt's words, “incessant friend-enemy disputes...embrace every sphere of human activity.”²⁶ In this way, the waxing and waning of desire is folded into politics and the event.²⁷

²² Réda Bensmaïa, “The Kafka Effect,” *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), xv-xvi.

²³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). 7-8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

²⁶ Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, trans. George Schwab and Erna Hilfstein (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 18.

²⁷ Reading Schmitt through Deleuze and Guattari suggests an immanent vision of Schmitt's thought, though a different one than the one put forward by Mika Ojakangas in *A Philosophy of Concrete Life* (Oxford: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2006). He argues that Schmitt sees late modernity as predominantly immanent and that Schmitt puts his concepts forward to try to inject some small moments of transcendence within that immanence. “All of Schmitt's central concepts refer to this transcendence

Though the political machine is connected to every social domain, an event occurs when desire “brings about a fully political and social investment, engages with an entire social field.”²⁸ As desires are added, subtracted, and transformed in the social milieu, machines are reconfigured, sometimes producing new political modes of being. The open-ended transformation that Marder identifies in Schmitt’s concept of the political is found in the Kafka-machine as well, which does not have a goal, endpoint, or solution. “The problem is...finding a way out, or even a way in, another side, a hallway, an adjacency.”²⁹ Political transformation is a matter of moving to the next state, the next situation, the next way of being, and the next form of political organization. It does not have a solution, such as the annihilation of the enemy, or a consistent mode of actualization, such as expropriation.

Machinic events not only open up political transformation, but resist Schmitt’s enticement to make sovereign decisions self-sufficient by locating them within the larger machinic context.³⁰ Thus we might rethink how Schmitt’s advocacy of the exception played out. Deleuze and Guattari speak of the character K’s desire for justice propelling him through the legal assemblage. Schmitt’s judicial and philosophical commitments,³¹ such as his interest in security, also propelled him through the legal-political assemblage. In 1921,

within immanence – and *it is this transcendence that he calls the concrete*...It is an *event (Ereignis)* – and, more specifically, it is an event that *perturbs* the universe of absolutely rational self-enclosed systems” (Ojakangas 2006, 33-4). The ruptures of the event are small transcendent moments insofar as they interrupt the flow of immanence. The problem with this view is that Schmitt consistently maintains that while people may increasingly believe in immanent worldviews, it is impossible to get rid of transcendent moments. Indeed, much of his work is dedicated to exposing the transcendent claims behind such worldviews. Additionally, Schmitt makes the distinction between people moving toward positivist or normative views and those moving toward immanent ones, both of which he equally opposes. At the end of *Political Theology II* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), Schmitt briefly states that Hans Blumenberg has made the best case for an immanent modernity, which he still rejects even as he attempts to sketch its implications. In contrast to Ojakangas, I read Schmitt as arguing that there are always a number of relatively transcendental systems in place. But while Schmitt argues for creating or reinforcing these through groundless events, I suggest taking those events to the edge of immanence to open new political configurations.

²⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 64.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

³⁰ For another critical discussion of Schmitt’s sovereign subject and its ability to make a decision, see chapter 5 of William E. Connolly’s *Pluralism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

³¹ This is a particularly important aspect of Schmitt’s thought that I will consider in the fourth section on his ethos.

Schmitt's desire was machined into his argument about the use of emergency powers according to article 48 of the Weimar Constitution. The use of emergency powers under article 48 likely helped hold Weimar democracy together in the face of the social forces stressing it. He later argued that article 48 granted Hindenburg the opportunity to forestall coalescing Nazi political forces and to reassert the liberal regime. But these attempts to engage the exception may have helped reshape public desire, turning more people toward Hitler while simultaneously providing a legal backdrop that facilitated Hitler's production of a new fascist political form. This illustrates the complex working of desire in the machine: seeking to preserve the established order, Schmitt thought that emergency powers could be used to prevent Hitler's rise to power. He may not have paid enough attention to how their repeated invocation might weaken the constitution and shift the public in Hitler's favor. It may also have prepared the public to accept the political exceptions invoked by Hitler. Schmitt's desire pushed him in one direction but the abstract machine that his work became a part of did not conform to his expectations. In a different way, the Left has recently tried to appropriate Schmitt's thought for its own purposes, in ways he likely would not have foreseen. In yet another way, the Nazi Regime's political order likely intensified Schmitt's anti-Semitic desire in a way that the Weimar Republic did not. His anti-Semitism then became more prominent in his work. In this situation, one can see how discontinuous displacement allows for a more open and contextualized reading of political events than that of absolute groundlessness.

A machinic assemblage thus helps us to grasp Schmitt's concept of the political, machinic desire, the state, and decisions. Machinic outputs vary. Abstract machines secure content through transcendental functions. In this instance, political events mobilize general risk to reinforce the existing system through conservative consolidations of power.

Alternatively, concrete machines—recall Schmitt's emphasis on the concrete situation—produce expressions that either give way to new machines or eventually get taken up within abstract machines. This encompasses those who accept pregnant risk to engage in an “immanent justice” in which they are “worth nothing except in themselves”³² to produce “another possible community.”³³ Yet Deleuze and Guattari indicate another way the transformative forces of the machine “measure the mode of existence...in terms of the capacity that [political assemblages] demonstrate for undoing their own segments.”³⁴ Thus it is no longer a matter of maintaining or transforming a way of existing, but of the transformative potential contained in a given mode of existence. Such a machine has four characteristics: it has no need for transcendental law, it has the suppleness to realize itself immanently, it has the ability to immanently mobilize other social groupings, and it has the ability to organize those three characteristics to form this machine.³⁵ Such a machine draws on one aspect of Schmitt's concept of the political, but then pursues a line of flight from it. While Schmitt deals with events that interrupt order, he emphasizes responses that establish a tighter order. Deleuze and Guattari's machine strains Schmitt's concept of the political to mobilize the interruptive potential of emancipatory politics, one form of which is the partisan.

Partisan Politics

It is all too easy, reading Schmitt's pointed sentences, to reduce his thought on the political to a formulaic analysis of a strong leader declaring and battling an enemy. Yet as was suggested in the previous section, the political can extend to all areas of life. This section will

³² Ibid., 86.

³³ Ibid., 17-18.

³⁴ Ibid., 87.

³⁵ Ibid., 85-8.

trace the decision through the range of the political, expanding upon the generalization of it as determined by the leader of a regime. This generalization is reinforced by a flashpoint in Schmitt's thought where he tries to limit who can decide. I suggest that he attempts this with the partisan because partisans take decentralized and potentially emancipatory political action.

Schmitt explores a number of social connections that delimit the political. First, the political involves claims about the world and human nature, or rather, such claims are always political.³⁶ Second, the political is oriented not just toward an existential threat and the possibility of having to kill,³⁷ but also, as the last section indicated, toward qualitative modes of living.³⁸ Some of the ways that the political organizes social life are that it draws out the possibility of war, establishes protection/obedience relations, determines modes of behavior, influences the intensity of association and dissociation between different groups, orients society toward an existential exception, reworks domestic and international relations, establishes peace and order, demands the end of private feuds in the face of external enemies, orients morality (declares “just” war), and asks citizens to die. All of these relations and determinations are produced in relation to a dominant cultural domain which shifts through different epochs and which itself is not determined by the political.³⁹ In addition, the political feeds into other developments. In *Theory of the Partisan*, Schmitt argues that partisanship is a development that blurs and intensifies traditional political distinctions such as that of regularity/irregularity. He analyzes the implications of this shift for changes in spatial relations (legal, technological), the destruction of social structures (the invention of

³⁶ Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 58-68.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 25-8, 33.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁹ Carl Schmitt, “The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations,” *The Concept of the Political*, trans. Matthias Konzen and John P. McCormick (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

party-based revolution), global-political context, and technical-industrial invention and production.⁴⁰ Finally, recall Schmitt's claim, cited above, that the political embraces every sphere of human activity.⁴¹ Schmitt's seemingly bellicose “friend-enemy” definition of the political refers to a deeper account of how the political courses through civil society.

It may be possible to limit the political by focusing on the state as the only relevant entity. Indeed, it is often claimed that most, if not all of the time, Schmitt is concerned primarily with the state as the political actor.⁴² True, Schmitt's language at times does suggest that only the state can make a political decision.⁴³ There are a number of reasons, however, that this exclusive reading cannot be maintained. When Schmitt speaks of the state as the political entity, he says that no defining criteria can be attached to the term “state” outside of it being the ultimate authority in the decisive case.⁴⁴ Schmitt further argues that all non-polemical definitions of the state are politically decisive, implying that either the definition itself or the person producing such a definition is politically motivated.⁴⁵ Third, Schmitt's argument concerning the advent of the total state—when the state loses its monopoly, blends with civil society, and every issue becomes politicized—implies that political decisions spread throughout society.⁴⁶

Schmitt further argues that there are instances in which the political itself actually dissolves the state, either in the case of a civil war or in the possible emergence of a global

⁴⁰ Carl Schmitt, *Theory of the Partisan*, Trans. G. L. Ulman (New York: Telos Press, 2007), 68-80.

⁴¹ Schmitt, *Leviathan*, 18.

⁴² See, for example, George Schwab's introduction to *The Concept of the Political* pages 5-11, and Tracy Strong's forward to the same, pages xix-xx.

⁴³ Particularly strong examples of this occur in *The Concept of the Political*, 45-6 and 51-2. In the latter instance he says directly that “A private person has no political enemies.” I would argue that taken in the context of the rest of his writing, the operative word in this sentence is “private” rather than “person.” While a person in their private role does not have any political enemies, an individual who takes up a political and therefore public friend-enemy relation has made a political decision.

⁴⁴ Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 19-20.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

state.⁴⁷ Finally, he seems to emphasize the role of the individual when he argues that: “Only the actual participants can correctly recognize, understand, and judge the concrete situation and settle the extreme case of conflict. Each participant is in a position to judge whether the adversary intends to negate his opponent's way of life and therefore must be repulsed or fought in order to preserve one's own form of existence.”⁴⁸ All of these are instances where Schmitt indicates that political decisiveness can be located outside of the state.

Schmitt’s most significant extension of political decisiveness to non-state entities occurs in *Theory of the Partisan*. The partisan is defined by a relation of irregularity with regard to the state. Lenin brings this to the point where the state is explicitly set aside as a determining factor. “We must keep the development of the concept of the political in view, which precisely here takes a subversive turn. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the classical, fixed concept of the political was based on the *state* of European international law, and had bracketed war in classical international law, i.e., had made it purely state war. Since the onset of the 20th century, this state war with its bracketing has been destroyed and replaced by wars of revolutionary parties.”⁴⁹ Even if the state was previously the model of the political, the 20th century sees it take second place to the revolutionary party.

A more telling issue arises when Schmitt addresses the “conceptual dissolution” of the partisan:

In general, and in view of the rapid changes in the world, the tendency of traditional or 'classical' concepts, as one likes to call them today, to be changed or also to be dissolved is all too understandable...In a very important book for our subject the illegal resistance fighter and underground activist are made the true type of partisan...Illegality is substituted for irregularity; resistance, for military combat...Then, ultimately, any individualist and non-conformist can be called a partisan, without any consideration as to whether he would even think of taking up arms.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Ibid., 46-7.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁹ Schmitt, *Theory of the Partisan*, 49.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 18-19.

This is a flashpoint in Schmitt's thought where his existential investments influence the politics of his thought. Schmitt rejects the political transformation in which the efficacy of militant partisans is extended to those engaging in illegal resistance and civil disobedience, labeling such a transformation a "dissolution." On this basis, he calls upon states to impose criteria that would establish a clear international legal definition of the partisan based on militant irregularity. He thus reduces protest to criminality and excludes it from politics.

Marder ignores Schmitt's resistance to this dissolution, providing a selective citation of Schmitt's analysis in order to support his Derridean reading of the concept of the political:

The process of concept dissolution that sees the partisan turn into everything and nothing in particular is most salient at a time of transition and, hence, in the emergence of a new *conceptual* unity. The minimal sense of ontological expropriation is epistemologically relevant to the concept of the political as well, permitting its form to adjust to the increasingly more significant partisan content and interspersing this period of adjustment with hyperbolic extensions and overvaluations of the partisan.⁵¹

But given that Schmitt resists this transition, Marder neglects a critical moment when the pregnant risk of the partisan is elided in favor of a state-centric politics of security. For Schmitt, definitions of what is political are themselves political. He sees this conceptual dissolution as a negative political development and thus intervenes against such a redefinition.

Sitze clarifies the tension between Schmitt's analysis of political transformation and his political participation. According to Sitze, Schmitt attempts to think the representational crisis of modernity which, in contrast to Roman Catholic representation, has no

⁵¹ Marder, *Groundless Existence*, 80.

transcendent reference point with which to mediate and evaluate the world.⁵² This has a particular effect on political analysis:

The inconsistency of Schmittian science with itself—its permanent and constitutive openness to polemic, ideology, and propaganda—is utterly consistent with science in the Schmittian sense: it is the manifestation, in Schmitt's own criticism of modernity, of the crisis Schmitt thinks in and through his genealogy of the political, of his discovery that modern political institutions are radically and originally incomplete in relation to their own attempts at peace, security, and reconciliation.⁵³

Political thought that accepts the crisis of modernity as real is unable to move beyond the crisis to secure the validity of its thought and conclusions. It can thus easily slide into polemic. Schmitt acknowledges the transformation in political partisanship on the basis of his theory, even as he slides in the next sentences into criticizing it.

Schmitt and Sitze both refer to the tendency of modern political theory to become polemicism as “risk.” Schmitt says that political analysis is always subject to such risk.⁵⁴ Sitze criticizes him for succumbing to the risk of polemic in his Nazi politics, framing it as a self-betrayal expressive of careerism and opportunism.⁵⁵ Such a judgment, however, ignores risk in the pregnant sense. Though Marder discusses pregnant risk, he also ignores the problematic treatment that Schmitt gives it. Risk is not just limited to the potential for political thinkers to become polemicists, as with Schmitt's Nazism, but extends to the personal risk of placing oneself outside the law. The activities of resistance that Schmitt excludes from partisan politics assume risk in this sense. At this flashpoint between risk and security, Schmitt resists the transition in partisan politics from irregularity to illegality, resistance and non-conformism. At stake is the emergence of a form of political resistance that can destabilize society but that also tends toward a leftist politics, which adopts a risky

⁵² Sitze, “A Farewell to Schmitt,” 36-39.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 45-6.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 46-50.

position in relation to the state. Schmitt seeks to deny political legitimacy to such partisan politics, relegating them to criminality.

Žižek identifies a similar move in Schmittian thought, which attempts “to depoliticize the conflict by bringing it to its extreme, via the direct militarization of politics...by reformulating it as a war between 'Us' and 'Them', our enemy, where there is no common ground for symbolic conflict.”⁵⁶ Žižek sees symptoms of this militarization both in the radical Right recategorizing class struggle as class warfare and in the primacy that Schmitt accords to relations between sovereign states over the politics of social antagonism. In opposition to militarization, Žižek suggests that “a leftist position should insist on the unconditional primacy of the inherent antagonism as constitutive of the political” in which “the struggle for one's voice to be heard and recognized as the voice of a legitimate partner” involves “destabilizing the 'natural' functional order of relations in the social body.”⁵⁷ It seems that this is the kind of social antagonism that Schmitt seeks to exclude when he resists the transformation of partisan politics.

What Žižek overlooks, however, is that while Schmitt politically resists a more democratic partisanship, his theory recognizes its significance. What Sitze misses is the pregnant risk expressed when class antagonism disrupts normal political processes. Epitomizing this, he provides a reading of Schmitt's *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes* to connect Schmitt's portrayal of Spinoza and Nazi ideology. In so doing, Sitze explains that Spinoza turns Hobbes on his head by putting forward “the extreme political position that it is not up to the sovereign to decide whether or not a given miracle is true, that this decision is instead up to me alone in my capacity as a reasoning and (possibly) pious

⁵⁶ Slavoj Žižek, “Carl Schmitt in the Age of Post-Politics,” in *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Verso, 1999), 29.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 28-9.

being.”⁵⁸ He even notes that it is for this reason that Schmitt views Spinoza as “the most radical and originary internal enemy of the modern state.”⁵⁹ Sitze, however, concludes that Schmitt identifies Spinoza's thought with Jewish thought and thereby reduces Schmitt's rejection to anti-Semitism. But if Spinoza is the originary enemy, it is because he touches upon an element of the decision in Schmitt's theory, but which Schmitt pursues in a politically opposed direction. Not only did Spinoza embody the excluded element, but the excluded play a positive role in his thinking. It is also the excluded who embody social antagonism when they disturb the normal order, and it is for this reason, in addition to anti-Semitism, that Schmitt rejects Spinoza. Ironically, Marder sides with Schmitt against Spinoza in developing his theory of groundless political decisiveness.⁶⁰ But the point at which the polemization of political analysis meets the pregnant risk of a challenge to the political order must be acknowledged for Schmitt's theory to maintain its analytical force, though he tries to suppress it.

For Sitze, Schmitt's failure in relation to his own project is his personal political engagement: “by turning his thought into the servant of his person, Schmitt in effect *arrested his own thought*, saving his proper name by suspending the very 'thought movement' that constituted the most forceful punch of his genealogical criticism of the modern.”⁶¹ But what Sitze sees as a character flaw is actually a political refusal on Schmitt's part to accept pregnant risk. Sitze is thus unintentionally literally correct when he points out that Schmitt's shortcoming is “a failure to come to terms with the possibility that the disintegration of the person he exposed in and through his own thought could...pronounce itself in his own

⁵⁸ Sitze, “A Farewell to Schmitt,” 52.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁶⁰ Marder, *Groundless Existence*, 77-8.

⁶¹ Sitze, “A Farewell to Schmitt,” 49.

person.”⁶² Schmitt was unwilling to risk his career, but also his personal security. Though Marder recognizes pregnant risk, he does not recognize Schmitt’s political resistance to the transformative power it mobilizes when individuals expose themselves to crisis, persecution, imprisonment, and death. Interestingly, this is the point at which Sitze, Žižek, and Schmitt all converge: none follows the conceptual dissolution that leads to a new form of the political partisan because they all accept it, albeit in different ways, as a limit to Schmittian thought.⁶³

Let us sketch what partisanship might entail. The domains treated by Schmitt – religion, economics and technology – would now be supplemented with others, such as our relation to the environment, education, and media, all of which have machines operating within them. Partisanship may have some roots in a critical disposition—a form of desire, a marginalized social position, an ethos of the event—that when incorporated into and modified by these machines leads to new political configurations. These new configurations may initially have only mild degrees of connection. But they are also politically intense, driven by an existential belief, risky, illegal, engaged in resistance, non-conformist, and operate on a small scale. Recent exemplars might include those engaged in whistle-blowing such as Chelsea Manning, Julian Assange, and Edward Snowden. Each has taken personal risk to try to expose what has been systematically excluded from normal political life, all while one or more states try to suppress them, at times through exceptional legal means. Indeed, “Snowden acted in full knowledge of the constitutionally questionable efforts of the Obama administration.”⁶⁴ Partisans such as these take up the groundless risk of the political

⁶² Ibid., 49.

⁶³ Ibid., 30, 64-66.

⁶⁴ Daniel Ellsberg, “Daniel Ellsberg: Snowden would not get a fair trial – and Kerry is wrong,” *The New York Times*, May 30, 2014, accessed June 2, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/30/daniel-ellsberg-snowden-fair-trial-kerry-espionage-act>.

event and, far from embodying the decisiveness of the state, expose themselves to the state's exceptional and perhaps proto-fascist legal measures.

Thinking the Event: Political Theology as Method

This section pursues a reading of *Political Theology* as a mode of thought oriented toward political events. It highlights their recurrent, risky, and existential character, and the decisions such events occasion. Here we can see how Schmitt inflects risk as an always possible threat rather than as a necessary part of social struggle. In doing so, he tends to locate decisive power at the head of political regimes. Nonetheless, his theory leaves itself open to a more decentralized way of thinking the decision. The limits of this theory can be better understood by comparing it with Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's notions of the decision.

Political theology is a specific way of thinking. It is a "thought process," a "consistent thinking," and a "juristic thinking."⁶⁵ Indeed, most of the second half of *Political Theology* is devoted to the question of modes of thinking. Schmitt uses the political-theological mode of thinking to understand historical and contemporary orders, and the events that help constitute them.⁶⁶ It may also be helpful for finding opportunities and developing abilities to have a transformative political effect.

Political theology uses the concept of sovereignty to focus on how power transforms order. "Sovereignty is the highest, legally independent, underived power...It is not the adequate expression of a reality but a formula, a sign, a signal...In political reality there is no irresistible highest or greatest power that operates according the certainty of natural law...The connection of actual power with the legally highest power is the fundamental

⁶⁵ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 1-2, 46, 48.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

problem of the concept of sovereignty.”⁶⁷ Political-theological thought seeks to connect the most efficacious power (theological) to an established order (political). Sovereignty is not absolute power since no power can guarantee a specific order through time, nor can power be fitted to a specific position or person. It is more like the greatest coefficient of influence actualized through a decision.

For Schmitt, developing a mode of thought in order to analyze the event is necessary because events are inevitable. An exception is an event in which an existing order is suspended and a new one is created through the decision of a sovereign.⁶⁸ Schmitt uses the exception to criticize philosophies that focus on the sufficiency of normative systems to anticipate and respond to every situation and event. For him, no system can do this. The exception addresses not only the ways in which a given order is challenged by something that it cannot absorb, but also how new orders come into being. The event between orders is a groundless moment to which the preexisting norm cannot apply: “A transformation takes place every time...That constitutive, specific element of a decision is, from the perspective of the content of the underlying norm, new and alien. Looked at normatively, the decision emanates from nothingness.”⁶⁹ Events occur when sovereign decisions introduce something previously excluded.

The event is inevitable and risky: “The exception, which is not codified in the existing legal order, can at best be characterized as a case of extreme peril, a danger to the existence of the state, or the like. But it cannot be circumscribed factually and made to

⁶⁷ Ibid., 17-8.

⁶⁸ There is a tendency to speak generally of the exception, which I will do as well. Nonetheless, it should be noted that Schmitt usually discusses specific kinds of exceptions each of which carries with it a different amount of authority for the sovereign to change or create laws. See, for example, Bendersky, *Theorist for the Reich*, 19-20, 31-39, 124-5, 176.

⁶⁹ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 31-2.

conform to a preformed law.”⁷⁰ No system can anticipate all the events that will challenge it, take it to its limits, and perhaps even bring it to an end. Even in the midst of an event it is not yet clear how it will be resolved.⁷¹ Schmitt thus says that a good but inadequate reference point is that the exception involves danger or peril to the existing order. Rather than describing the event as uncertain and risky, Schmitt makes it perilous. The risk of the event thus becomes something to be warded off, controlled, or combated, rather than accepted and engaged for the purpose of social transformation.

Nonetheless, Schmitt comes close to working the risk of the event into his theory.

All new and great impulses, every revolution and reformation, every new elite originates from asceticism and voluntary or involuntary poverty (poverty meaning above all the renunciation of the security of the *status quo*)...Every genuine rebirth seeking to return to some original principle, every genuine *ritornar al principio*, every return to pure, uncorrupted nature appears as cultural or social nothingness to the comfort and ease of the existing *status quo*. It grows silently and in darkness...The moment of brilliant representation is also and at once the moment in which every link to the secret and inconspicuous beginning is endangered.⁷²

Breaking with an existential order to create a new one involves risk, loss of security, loss of comfort, and asceticism. But even in this instance he elucidates risk in the name of a “cool-headed knowledge” to overcome “panic,” excluding the terms of eventual activism. But reading this against Schmitt, uncertainty and risk seem to have a particular meaning today when resisting the comforts and security of neoliberal Western existence requires a degree of asceticism. It seems likely that political resistance entails a readiness to give up a degree of comfort and security, that such moments of deprivation are inescapable, and that they will likely press upon us at various points in our lives. Though Schmitt does not make a distinction between the risk involved in trying to create something new through

⁷⁰ Ibid., 6.

⁷¹ The uncertainty of the outcome of the event is further attested to by Schmitt's discussion of competence. See Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 31.

⁷² Schmitt, “Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations,” 94.

revolutionary activity and trying to constitute a tight order, he does downplay the former. In fact, he does not believe the latter is possible. Nevertheless, every attempt at genuine return is just as groundless as the dissolution of a revolution; once the exception occurs, the connections to the original or envisioned model are jeopardized by the way the event plays out. The danger involved in breaking with the given order is tied to the uncertainty of the outcome.

Finally, the condition of “concrete life” in the event generates existential transformation: “Precisely a philosophy of concrete life must not withdraw from the exception and the extreme case, but must be interested in it to the highest degree...The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything: It confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception.”⁷³ The exception calls not only a particular formal order into question, but also the ground on which it exists: the stability of regular and normal living. On one hand, the exception is constitutive of public interest, state interest, safety, and public well-being.⁷⁴ But on the other, it also grounds the “everyday frame of life”

⁷³ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 15.

Schmitt paraphrases the formula “the rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything” from Kierkegaard: “The exception explains the general and itself” (Schmitt 1985, 15). Karl Löwith has argued that here Schmitt inappropriately decontextualizes Kierkegaard and distorts his meaning (Löwith, “The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt,” in *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, ed. Richard Wolin, trans. Gary Steiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 141-3). Löwith has two main arguments. First, Kierkegaard wrote only in the context of his theological thought and has political views which were detached from this. Kierkegaard thus did not mean to justify every case of the exception. But Schmitt thinks that politics and theology are less distinct than Löwith suggests. He does not say that Kierkegaard is writing about politics, but instead draws on him on the basis of his method of “systemic structure,” according to which Schmitt uses the same logic as Kierkegaard, even if writing on a different subject. Löwith's second argument is that Schmitt neglects the fact that in the cited section Kierkegaard argues for the polemical nature of the universal against the exception, which is contrary to Schmitt's intent. But Schmitt also acknowledges the polemical nature of the universal against the exception in his understanding of the political role that Kelsen and other liberal legal scholars have played. It thus seems that Schmitt draws on Kierkegaard in a significant way. Each thinker is concerned with an event/exception that breaks into the existing dominant order and has a transformative effect upon it. Though they develop this thought in different ways, they each privilege the exception as an event through which change occurs. For a different yet compelling critique and extension of Löwith's argument, see Adam Sitze, “A Farewell to Schmitt.”

⁷⁴ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 6.

to which rules and order are applied.⁷⁵ In this way, the event transforms the existential conditions for the routines, norms, politics, and assumptions of everyday life.

Yet it seems that not all events are suspensions of the constitution that threaten the existence of the state. The entire order need not come into question for an edge of eventual groundlessness to come into effect. An understanding of such marginal events can be drawn out by examining less intense and more analytical points in *Political Theology*. One such moment arises in Schmitt's analysis of Kelsen's normative jurisprudence: "The normative science to which Kelsen sought to elevate jurisprudence in all purity cannot be normative in the sense that the jurist by his own free will makes value assessments; he can only draw on the given (positively given) values. Objectivity thus appears to be possible, but has no necessary connection with positivity (*Positivität*). Although the values on which the jurist draws are given to him, he confronts them with relativistic superiority."⁷⁶ Kelsen believes that applying the norm does not entail making value assessments, but only implementing already given values. Schmitt points out that while there is no necessary connection between what the values are and how they are applied, there is a necessary connection between the production of a system of values (positivity) and each application of those positive values. The same legal-political energy is tapped at the moment when a government creates a law and when an official enforces that law or decides not to. The latter minor suspensions could be extended to include each time a person engaged in civil disobedience calls a law into question. There are thus minor exceptions in which a decision is made without dissolving the order. This relativity in relation to the system expresses the groundlessness that occurs in the dissolution of the system through the exception.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 13.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 20-21.

Since political theology thinks decisions that change an established order, it analyzes the perceptions and thoughts that challenge that order as well. Schmitt thus extends sovereign decisiveness to the very act of legal perception: “Such a decision in the broadest sense belongs to every legal perception. Every legal thought brings a legal idea, which in its purity can never become reality, into another aggregate condition and adds an element that cannot be derived either from the content of the legal idea or from the content of a general positive legal norm that is to be applied.”⁷⁷ The decisive power of thought arises when it seeks to extend or challenge an established system: political theology occupies a place between legal ideals and existing law, awaiting actualization. The power to think beyond the dictates of a given order and to assess its potential to change provides a step towards reshaping that order.⁷⁸ Creative thinking is the first step of partisanship. The effect of each interpretation would remain to be seen in each instance, but even those who are not functionaries of the state begin to alter the existing order by considering and advocating a different interpretation. Following this line, Marder argues that interpretation in Schmitt is laden with existential decisions: “Every interpretation is already an existential decision which is necessarily active, transformative, and reconstituting.”⁷⁹ Interpretation expresses and reshapes desire in relation to the machine, the law, and perhaps even the desires of others.

Despite this potential, the contours and limitations of political theology become clear when Schmitt is examined alongside Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. For Kierkegaard, the decision is tied to faith. It poses the question of how an anxious person is to proceed since

⁷⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁷⁸ Indeed, Schmitt was troubled by the direction that thought seemed to be taking in the early 20th century: “The main line of development will undoubtedly unfold as follows: Conceptions of transcendence will no longer be credible to most educated people, who will settle for either a more or less clear immanence-pantheism or a positivist indifference toward any metaphysics” (Schmitt 1985, 50). He sees this trend as unrealistic and ultimately depoliticizing. Schmitt reaches this diagnosis on the basis of political-theological thinking and at the same time argues for political-theological thinking as an effective political counter-force to this trend.

⁷⁹ Marder, *Groundless Existence*, 8-9.

anxiety indicates faith: “Whether the single individual actually is undergoing a spiritual trial or is a knight of faith, only the single individual himself can decide.”⁸⁰ The individual is critical because there is no way to achieve faith or guarantee that one has faith other than the decision. For both Schmitt and Kierkegaard, then, the event presses the individual to decide.

There are, nonetheless, a number of differences between Kierkegaard and Schmitt. Though an existential change is involved in both versions of the decision, each draws on it in a different way. For Schmitt, it is a matter of concrete life and existential threat. The decision is dangerous because it risks life to bring about political change. If political forces do not align with a person's decision, you may lose your life, be sent to prison, or exiled. Kierkegaard elucidates and valorizes the internal tension of anxiety and spiritual trial once they manifest in individual life. Kierkegaard's decision accepts anxiety and uncertainty and lives through these, just as it embraces the incomprehensibility of God. A Schmittian decision attempts to change social order while a Kierkegaardian one embraces life with anxiety. The knight of faith cannot rely on others, cannot calculate the outcome, and can find no guide in the matter. Schmitt thinks that we cannot say what the exception will be or who will decide. But Kierkegaard goes further. For him, even after the decision is made one cannot judge the result. Schmitt, on the other hand, maintains a standard of competence: it is possible after the fact to establish the result of the decision and whether it was successful.

Klossowski's elaboration of Nietzsche's thought connects it to Schmitt at a number of points. First, there is the dimension of enmity: “Nietzsche posed a new question in a tone of voice that was completely foreign to all previous speculation: Who is the *adversary*, who is the *enemy* to be destroyed?...In determining the enemy, thought is able to create its own

⁸⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 79.

space, to extend it, to breathe freely.”⁸¹ For Nietzsche, the adversary is gregarious culture: Christianity, morality, routinized science, and art or, in other words, cultural forms which militate against and occlude singular thought. In declaring this relation of enmity, Nietzsche tries to delineate a space for thinking. Fighting an enemy does not entail violence as it often does with Schmitt. It is instead a struggle to free oneself from the established instincts and judgments of gregarious culture. This, then, is the context in which we can understand Nietzsche's notion of sovereignty: “Sovereignty lies in the arbitrary manner by which one feels existence, which can be enriched through hostile resistance, or increased through the emotion of an accomplice.”⁸² This is the sovereignty of an “incommunicable emotion,” the event that Nietzsche experienced as the Eternal Return. The relation of enmity orients the self towards such a sovereign experience and enhances it. Indeed, Nietzsche is referring to the enriching experience of having enemies when he coins the phrase “spiritualization of enmity. This consists in our profound understanding of the value of having enemies: in short, our doing and deciding the converse of what people previously thought and decided.”⁸³ In Nietzsche's view, singular experience and thought can be enhanced and propelled by enemies and traditions which attempt to constrain and inhibit it.

The decision establishes the sovereignty of an experience and the enmity of gregarious culture: “One's resistance to the invading and uncontrolled forces is only a question of interpretation – and is always the result of an *arbitrary* decision.”⁸⁴ The individual is never separate from impinging forces. Nonetheless, in that locus of forces there is space for a decision to at least resist, reduce, or refigure the forces of gregariousness in order to

⁸¹ Pierre Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 8.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Duncan Large (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 22.

⁸⁴ Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, 88.

allow other forces to be expressed. Klossowski argues that such a decision was made when Nietzsche chose to transmute his intense experience with Lou Salome into the thought that fueled *The Gay Science*.⁸⁵ Finally, Nietzsche's notion of the mask allows others to read an individual according to gregarious culture while freeing the individual to explore the interiority of their own affective experience: "The person who appears to wear the mask must also have *decided* on such-and-such a face with regard to 'himself'."⁸⁶ Having made this decision, the individual decides to affect a mask in the place of the gregarious self. Even Nietzsche's mustache may have been part of such a mask.

Nietzsche's decision mobilizes the sovereignty of singular experience against the generalizing effects of politics. He shares a number of points with Schmitt, but focuses on the way the individual interacts with culture rather than political enmity. For Schmitt, relations of enmity inevitably produce political events that rearrange or subdue them. For Nietzsche, enmity is a way of sustaining a connection to the event. Having made gregarious culture an adversary as well as a condition of his being, he resists its forces even as he selectively draws upon it. The sovereign experience is something that both isolates the individual and shows how the individual is the product of manifold influences. Whereas Schmitt's sovereign is securely constituted, even if limited in influence, Nietzsche's sovereign experiences both the limitation and excessiveness of the individual. A Schmittian decision is often an attempt to resolve an event into a new, gregarious mode of being. Nietzsche is closer to Kierkegaard in wanting to keep a relation to the event open. But while Kierkegaard accepts the tension and anxiety of remaining open to the event, Nietzsche seeks no such harmonious solution. If he sees the need for enmity it is because he does not want to infuse the feeling of anxiety with transcendent faith, but to allow the same impulses that produced

⁸⁵ Ibid., 99.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 224.

the event to upset, disturb, and clarify his experience in whatever form they come. There is no stable outside to which he can affix his experience, even as he works upon the cultural regularities that enable him to be.

The Political Ethos of Carl Schmitt

For Schmitt, all modes of analysis and ways of viewing the world are infused with existential commitments. This commitment politicizes the world. For him, all positions are political and any claim that a position is not political is also political. Even the most basic terms upon which political analysis relies are political.

Words such as state, republic, society, class, as well as sovereignty, constitutional state, absolutism, dictatorship, economic planning, neutral or total state, and so on, are incomprehensible if one does not know exactly who is to be affected, combated, refuted, or negated by such a term. Above all the polemical character determines the use of the word political regardless of whether the adversary is designated as nonpolitical (in the sense of harmless), or vice versa if one wants to disqualify or denounce him as political in order to portray oneself as nonpolitical (in the sense of purely scientific, purely moral, purely juristic, purely aesthetic, purely economic, or on the basis of similar purities) and thereby superior.⁸⁷

There are no fixed categories on which to base a stable analysis since all such terms are invented in and inflected with politics. But such a view also reflects Schmitt's priorities rather than coming from a neutral political analysis. As he says of his political-theological mode of analysis, it “presupposes a consistent and radical ideology.”⁸⁸

On the basis of this ideology, Schmitt holds to the inevitability of politicization:

“Whether the extreme exception can be banished from the world is not a juristic question. Whether one has confidence and hope that it can be eliminated depends on philosophical, especially on philosophical-historical and metaphysical, convictions.”⁸⁹ His analysis asserts that the exception is an inevitable part of any social order, but also that this is a matter of

⁸⁷ Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 30-32.

⁸⁸ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 42.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

conviction rather than rational analysis. Another example concerns the possibility of a global community: Against the “normative ideal” that someday people will cease to group themselves according to the friend-enemy distinction, Schmitt holds to the “hope” and “pedagogic ideal” of the “inherent reality and the real possibility of such a distinction.”⁹⁰ That the political is inescapable is not only a conviction for Schmitt, but also defines the limits of his aspirations.

He affirms the world of political dynamics and actively tries to draw others into it, pushing readers to decide what they believe.⁹¹ One such point is his analysis of a politics based on freedom, where Schmitt suggests that freedom has no meaning independent of a politics of coercion and could only be given one through “an anthropological profession of faith.”⁹² On one level, Schmitt openly identifies points where a different set of beliefs would lead to different conclusions. On another, at those points he mobilizes a vision of uncertainty and insecurity to push readers toward his politics of enmity. This deceptive combination of apparent honesty and potential threat lures readers into forgetting the way nonhuman processes affect human life and worrying instead about securing a normal mode of human existence. The pressure of politicization siphons attention and energy from the planetary and cosmic dimensions that both feed into and exceed politics. Nietzsche and Kierkegaard help show the limits of this strategy. Since Schmitt thinks the event is a political affair, he reduces the world to a vision of competing human dynamics. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche also look beyond the human, to God in the first case and nature in the other. They locate the event outside of politics as well as inside it. This carries uncertainty beyond

⁹⁰ Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 28.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 53-4.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 57-8.

Schmitt's notion of the decision and Kierkegaard and Nietzsche each to develop a more supple ethos of the event.

Schmitt secures his notion of political events by anchoring it in human nature: “One could test all theories of state and political ideas according to their anthropology and thereby classify these as to whether they consciously or unconsciously presuppose man to be by nature evil or by nature good...the problematic or unproblematic conception of man is decisive for the presupposition of every further political consideration, the answer to the question whether man is a dangerous being or not, a risky or a harmless creature.”⁹³ The definitions of good and evil are not strict for Schmitt. Under evil he includes corruption, weakness, cowardice, stupidity, brutality, sensuality, vitality, irrationality, and so on. Under good he includes reasonableness, perfectibility, the capacity of being manipulated, of being taught, peacefulness, and others. In his version of things, all of the theories that presume humans to be evil also argue that relations of enmity will always exist and that a decisive entity is necessary to produce temporary systems of relative stability and safety. Alternatively, theories presuming humans to be good assume that it is possible to eliminate enmity from the world and, therefore, that a stabilizing entity is not necessary. The former entails an inherent political aspect to the world, the latter that politics is not a fundamental part of life.⁹⁴ This is not merely a claim about human nature, but an organization of that nature according to Schmitt's decisive characteristics. While there are human characteristics in Schmitt's theory that speak to what might happen within the Anthropocene, he does not attend to the shape of the human character that brought on this era, what it means, what

⁹³ Ibid., 58.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 58-68.

might be done to alter our relation to the world, or what it means if the greatest threat is not an enemy.⁹⁵

The belief that humans are good is already beyond Schmitt's system and can be accounted for only as a depoliticizing force. He thinks that humans are naturally evil, meaning that they are “by no means an unproblematic but a dangerous and dynamic being.”⁹⁶ Even if humans achieve peace, enlightenment, balance, and stability for a time, it is in their nature to change, to adopt new perspectives, social configurations and modes of being. Humans always have the potential to behave violently. Schmitt writes that at an existential level prefiguring political relations “the entire life of a human being is a struggle and every human being symbolically a combatant.”⁹⁷ Being alive involves some kind of struggle which is often carried into social relations. Though Schmitt accentuates this dimension, the dynamism of which it is a part also includes chaos and strife periodically giving way to normalcy and dissociative tendencies becoming latent.

Though for Schmitt humans are evil, he substitutes a different definition of the good when it comes to particular political positions: “Everyone agrees that whenever antagonisms appear within a state, every party wants the general good—therein resides after all the *bellum omnium contra omnes*.”⁹⁸ Here it is not a question of human goodness, but of the way a position defines itself, or of which position is successful in producing order. Ultimately this collapses the distinction between good and evil into Schmitt's own political terms: good is reintroduced only to substantiate one side of the friend-enemy distinction, to orient people toward political violence, and to push them to a political decision. This expresses his

⁹⁵ Initially, this threat may refer to climate change as the enemy. But as will be explored in chapter five, David Orr, Clive Hamilton, and George Monbiot take it to mean that we are the enemy, which is an even greater impasse for Schmittian thought.

⁹⁶ Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 61.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁹⁸ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 9.

ontology: “For life struggles not with death, spirit not with spiritlessness; spirit struggles with spirit, life with life, and out of the power of an integral understanding of this arises the order of human things. *Ab integro nascitur ordo* [an order is born from renewal].”⁹⁹ He concerns himself only with the “order of human things.” Nietzsche would want a broader definition of life and Kierkegaard of spirit. It may be possible to read Schmitt as saying that evil is just a force of transition bringing various spiritual investments and vital constellations into struggle with each other to produce order, but I have shown that his ethos emphasizes personal success and security over personal risk and precarity.

One of the points where Schmitt writes in favor of risk comes in his critique of political romanticism. He argues that romantics regularly change their approach to the world without ever establishing firm attachments: “Romanticism is subjectified occasionalism because an occasional relationship to the world is essential to it...the romantic subject occupies the central position and makes the world and everything that occurs in it into a mere occasion...only now does the occasional display the total consistency of its repudiation of all consistency. Only now can everything really become the occasion of everything else.”¹⁰⁰ The romantic commits only to their own subjectivity; the world achieves solidity only by being subordinated to it. They see themselves as the only stable entities and make what they want out of reality based on subjective impressions. Their only consistency is to relinquish all consistency. The content of the world ceases to matter and the imagination of the subject becomes a new reality.

The problem for Schmitt is that romantics ignore real events in favor of indulging their own experience: “For him, even the greatest external event – a revolution or a world war – is intrinsically indifferent. The incident becomes significant only when it has become

⁹⁹ Schmitt, “The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations,” 96.

¹⁰⁰ Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, trans. Guy Oakes (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2011), 17-18.

the occasion for a great experience, a genial apprehension, or some other romantic creation.”¹⁰¹ Events that change the world mean little to the romantic if they cannot be aestheticized. On the other hand, every moment regardless of its significance or insignificance has the potential to become an event for the romantic.¹⁰² Romantics have many strategies for rejecting the world in favor of their impression of it: focusing endlessly on the possibilities in the world to the point where little reality remains; combining existing realities to form an amalgamation cut off from reality; and interacting only with their own affect to produce a creative interpretation of reality.¹⁰³ While on one hand political romantics are constantly recreating their own world,¹⁰⁴ their political efficacy is that they become fellow travelers who never involve themselves in what political authorities do.¹⁰⁵

It may seem that the position of the political romantic is full of decisions and possibility, since any point is potentially a starting point. Yet Schmitt argues that this is not the case. Rather, the constant 'decisions' and explorations of possibility exclude any real decision and any possibility for change: “A legal or a moral decision would be senseless and it would inevitably destroy romanticism. This is why the romantic is not in a position to deliberately take sides and make a decision.”¹⁰⁶ Romanticism can and has supported both leftist revolutionary movements and reactionary movements for restoration. Beyond an inability to take a decisive moral or political stance, the starting points taken by romanticism are always insufficient to found any kind of actual social order: “An emotion that does not transcend the limits of the subjective cannot be the foundation of a community. The intoxication of sociability is not the basis of a lasting association. Irony and intrigue are not

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 96-7.

¹⁰² Ibid., 74.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 66, 72, 94.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 83-4.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 122-3.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 124.

points of social crystallization...this is because no society can discover an order without a concept of what is normal and what is right.”¹⁰⁷ A romantic cannot make a political decision since that would require committing to a social order. Schmitt does note that romantics have political effects but they are not themselves capable of engaging in politics. As such, they are much more likely to be used by existing political movements than to push the movement in any direction on their own.¹⁰⁸

A crucial aspect of politics foreign to political romanticism is taking risks. Political romanticism may try to engage in politics but always without “assuming its own responsibility and risk. Political activity is not possible in this way.”¹⁰⁹ Politics always involves existential risk and political romantics refuse to take risk or responsibility. They refuse to commit to a position for which they could be held accountable later, instead following their inspiration from moment to moment. Even though they are used by politics, the romantic disposition itself is depoliticizing. To resist this, Schmitt insists that romantics should risk themselves to build attachments to the social and the political.

Schmitt also addresses the importance of risk in his analysis of the partisan. Yet as has been shown, he tries to limit the types of political activities to which partisanship applies. Neglecting this polemical limitation, Marder focuses on how at the conceptual level pregnant risk “condenses in itself the experience of groundlessness” which

cannot be manipulated because, in a state devoid of hope, the partisans do not anticipate a restoration of normalcy and security—at least not for themselves—and because they willingly assume the danger instead of evading it...The partisan runs aground in the turbulence and uncertainty of the political, having refused to keep away from peril or to navigate around the extremes in an attempt to negotiate a safe middle route between the threat of biological death and the certainty of political annihilation in an emergency situation...what instigates *partisan activity* is the total renunciation of rights in the spirit of *juridical passivity* and in an extreme reaction that overflows the distinction between the active

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 161.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 162.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 159.

and the passive subjective compartments, the Nietzschean dichotomy of self-affirmation and *ressentiment*.¹¹⁰

Partisans who take on pregnant risk undergo existential groundlessness. The hopelessness of this experience is not empty nihilism, because it refuses existing systems of legality, ethics, and rational behavior and instead draws its energy from the deep wells of possibility that contain transformation and death in equal proportion. Self-affirmation and *ressentiment* both require existential coordinates within the social system, coordinates the partisan no longer maintains. Instead, pregnant risk is oriented toward the future for the sake of change.

Despite the problems in how both Schmitt and Marder theorize pregnant risk, this reading can suggest an emancipatory way of engaging and producing the event of political change.

Though the notions of risk and partisanship bring out some potentials of Schmitt's thought, these ideas also have severe limits. His theory is too constrained and self-referential to account for the climate event or the peril arising from it. This not an isolated problem but connects to other events in nature and society. Thus we can read the conservative side of Schmitt in order to understand some of the emergency measures and violence that states are likely to employ as the stresses of climate change feed into various social systems. From a slightly different direction, some have already argued in favor of green authoritarianism as the only effective response to the climate and environmental crises.¹¹¹ Others, like Latour, call for a horizontal organization of friend/enemy lines around the issue of climate change.

Yet Schmitt, with modifications, can speak to the issue of placing oneself outside the political-legal system in order to alter its composition. Something like this is operative when over 1,200 people volunteer to be arrested protesting the Keystone XL Pipeline,¹¹² or almost

¹¹⁰ Marder, 39-40.

¹¹¹ David Orr, *Down to the Wire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) 52-3.

¹¹² Mark Guarino, "Hundreds arrested protesting Keystone XL oil pipeline," *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 3, 2011, accessed June 3, 2014, <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/2011/0903/Hundreds->

400 students do the same thing three years later.¹¹³ Tim DeChristopher went to prison for fraudulently bidding to win leases and drilling rights worth nearly two million dollars to publicly owned wilderness areas in Utah. Rather than focusing on how to get out of prison, he encouraged others to find ways to get in. Following this line of thought, some have called on people to actively refuse to submit to laws that are unjust and instead engage in civil disobedience to drive an effective political response to climate change.¹¹⁴ This issue will be expanded in chapter five. At this point it is enough to note that as problematic as Schmitt's political philosophy is, it may well be reworked to inform the risky politics of climate change.

arrested-protesting-Keystone-XL-oil-pipeline.

¹¹³ Wen Stephensen, "Nearly 400 Arrested at XL Dissent – The Largest White House Civil Disobedience Action in a Generation," *The Nation*, March 7, 2014, accessed June 3, 2014, <http://www.thenation.com/article/178739/nearly-400-arrested-xl-dissent-largest-white-house-civil-disobedience-action-generati>.

¹¹⁴ Clive Hamilton, *Requiem for a Species* (New York: Earthscan, 2010), 225.

Chapter Four

Foucault's Techniques of the Event

...a thinker who did not seem interested in accumulating a capital of lasting truths, but who stepped onto the stage as someone who intended to write a history of lightning bolts. Had Foucault entertained ontological intentions, he could have indeed claimed that all truthful Being is of the nature of lightning. The meaning of Being is not existence and the timeless preservation of essence, but event, the opening up of the horizon, and the spawning of temporary orders...Foucault accomplished the breakthrough to a foundational research oriented toward Event philosophy...[and] stepped up to the challenge of rethinking the core of all philosophy, the theory of freedom: no longer in the style of a philosophical theology of liberation—also known as alienation theory, but as a doctrine of the Event that liberates the individual and in which he moulds and risks himself.¹

Following Sloterdijk's assessment, Foucault thinks through the event more extensively than the theorists considered so far. His orientation towards the collective history of Western knowledge pushed him to explore, define, and transgress its limits. To do this he developed a method of exploration and explanation that refuses to adopt already given, unitary, necessary, inevitable, or extra-historical modes of analysis. The event is a critical part of this approach. For Foucault, however, it is not just a matter of the event, but of an approach to it that implicates the researcher in the process of knowledge production. He thus produced concepts, techniques, descriptions, and experiences that help us engage the event.

Foucault explains the method of “eventalization” at a roundtable on *Discipline and Punish*. “It means making visible a *singularity* at places where there is a temptation to invoke a historical constant, an immediate anthropological trait, or an obviousness which imposes itself uniformly on all. To show that things 'weren't as necessary as all that'...A breach of self-evidence, of those self-evidences on which our knowledges, acquiescences and practices rest: this is the first theoretico-political function of 'eventalization'.”² A method that is able to uncover and outline events requires a politics which resists explanations that presuppose a necessary result. The first step in eventalization does not involve saying anything about the

¹ Peter Sloterdijk, *Philosophical Temperaments*, trans. Creston Davis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 98-99.

² Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Effect*, ed. Graham Burchell Colin Gordon and Peter Miller. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 76.

object in question, but requires the investigator to remove herself to a degree from authoritative ways of ordering the world.

“Secondly, eventalization means rediscovering the connections, encounters, supports, blockages, plays of forces, strategies, and so on which at a given moment establish what subsequently counts as being self-evident, universal and necessary. In this sense, one is indeed effecting a sort of multiplication or pluralization of causes.”³ The second step examines the processes by which an event comes to pass. The event is thus not a “reasonless break in an inert continuum,”⁴ but rather occurs in a saturated context. Eventalization explores how an event was constituted, including the relation to the investigator’s context, and the limitations imposed by an efficient image of causality.

The aim is that by “lightening the weight of causality, 'eventalization' thus works by constructing around the singular event analyzed as a process a 'polygon' or rather a 'polyhedron' of intelligibility, the number of whose faces is not given in advance and can never properly be taken as finite. One has to proceed by progressive, necessarily incomplete saturation.”⁵ Focusing on the event pushes Foucault away from an analysis of causality that produces final explanations and toward a notion of intelligibility that draws out the contingent characteristics and processes that constitute an event. New investigations are then able to modify, expand, re-contextualize, or re-purpose the object of inquiry. Eventalization thus reveals latent connections and forges new ones between the event's context and the researcher's own. As Foucault says repeatedly, it should be no surprise to people that his views, methods, and analyses changed over the years, since the point of doing research was to not stay the same.

³ Ibid., 76.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 77.

What is uncovered through eventalization is not just what happened, but the conditions that made it possible for things to take place as they did. You identify conditions of possibility, not sufficient causality. For eventalization points to some of the critical points according to which history could have occurred otherwise. This is what Foucault means when he speaks of “eventalizing singular ensembles of practices, so as to make them graspable as different regimes of 'jurisdiction' and 'veridiction'.”⁶ Not only the “truth” of the event is examined, but the conditions upon which it was possible for it to be true. The researcher becomes implicated in the event, since there is a link between how she is constituted and how an explanation of the event becomes accepted. The same commitment to freeing oneself of established explanatory modes leads one to appreciate how a particular event was constituted.

Eventalization is not just a method and a theoretico-political commitment, it expresses a political spirituality. “What is history, given there is continually being produced within it a separation of true and false'...How can one analyze the connection between ways of distinguishing true and false and ways of governing oneself and others? The search for a new foundation for each of these practices, in itself and relative to the other, the will to discover a different way of governing oneself through a different way of dividing up true and false – this is what I would call 'political *spiritualité*’.”⁷ Foucault connects a way of doing history, a way of examining one's own presuppositions, and a way of governing oneself differently through the event. The work of methodological freedom is tied to working on political freedom. The elements share a political spirituality or an ethos of the event. This chapter examines the development of this ethos in Foucault's work.

⁶ Ibid., 79.

⁷ Ibid., 82.

In the first part I will address Foucault's notion of a "limit-experience." Limit-experiences produce an unlivable yet insightful tension that presses us to be otherwise. This tension propels Foucault's own work and filters into larger social and political movements. Limit-experiences are events that spawn personal and political transformation as they operate through fluid subjects and societies. Foucault argues that these experiences are particularly relevant in the modern era, which does not contain a shared reference to a transcendent outside such as God.

The second part looks at how events occur at multiple levels across different timescales while sharing degrees of connection with each other, producing more or less extensive transformations. One example of this can be seen in the connection between limit-experiences as micro-events and transitions between different *epistemes* as macro-events. Foucault's experience reading Borges enabled him to perceive epistemic transformations in how we understand the world. Our current *episteme* is characterized by the figure of the human, which is constitutive of knowledge production across a number of domains. Foucault suggests some events which may help us transition out of this anthropological mode of being.

In the third section, I turn to Foucault's work on care of the self. Caring for oneself is a matter of developing an ethos of the event and even of instilling an active and transformative relation to the event within oneself. These spiritual transformations produce a more worldly disposition that is better equipped to respond to unexpected events. In addition, such transformations align our personal conduct with the truths to which we hold. Foucault argues that developing such an ethos is a politically indispensable task for today, even if it is not sufficient for politics.

Limit-experience as Event

The idea of a limit-experience was crucial for Foucault, yet he wrote little about it. His most extensive discussion of the concept is in a 1978 interview with Duccio Trombadori. In the interview, Foucault claims that: “The idea of a limit-experience that wrenches the subject from itself is...what explains the fact that however boring, however erudite my books may be, I’ve always conceived of them as direct experiences aimed at pulling myself free of myself, at preventing me from being the same.”⁸ Limit-experiences are at the center of Foucault's life and work, pushing him to become otherwise.

A limit-experience incites transformation by making experience intense to the point of being unlivable. “What is required is the maximum of intensity and the maximum of impossibility at the same time...experience has the function of wrenching the subject from itself, of seeing to it that the subject is no longer itself, or that it is brought to its annihilation or its dissolution.”⁹ Foucault is interested in making an experience so intense that it becomes unlivable. Clarifying this, he says: “The experience through which we grasp the intelligibility of certain mechanisms (for example, prison, punishment, and so on) and the way in which we are enabled to detach ourselves from them by perceiving them differently will be, at best, one and the same thing.”¹⁰ The idea is to increase the intensity of experience. A limit-experience is an event in which once we see how things are, we must live otherwise than we have. The self that participated in a given situation on established terms is no longer able to do so.

⁸ Michel Foucault, “Interview with Michel Foucault,” *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, Trans, Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 2001), 241-2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 241.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 244.

Foucault's project is not just desubjectivation, but also "to construct himself."¹¹

Against a reading that would see the limit-experience as only capable of negation, it contains two positive aspects that attract Foucault. First, the negation is a criticism founded on a new degree of intelligibility. Second, the experience does not just destroy the subject, but pushes it to become a new one; it does not open upon a void, but establishes traces and possibilities for experimentation and becoming a different self. As Foucault states, "I'm an experimenter in the sense that I write in order to change myself and in order not to think the same thing as before."¹²

In addition to being personal projects, Foucault's limit-experiences were public interventions. "It's not at all a matter of transporting personal experiences into knowledge. In the book, the relationship with the experience should make possible a transformation, a metamorphosis, that is not just mine but can have a certain value, a certain accessibility for others. So that the experience is available for others to have...this experience must be capable of being linked in some measure to a collective practice, to a way of thinking."¹³ A limit-experience is not confined to the idiom of individual subjectivity, but addresses a larger social constellation. As others read and repeat the experience, it becomes collective. They may find that this experience brings them into contact with a piece of the world that they can no longer bear to experience as it is. They are now different people because they are impelled by this experience to change their practice and thought. For Foucault, such a change can play a fundamental role in the production of social movements.

The effect of the limit-experience comes from using history to interrupt the present in a way that illuminates it. The goal is "to invite others to share an experience of what we

¹¹ Ibid., 242.

¹² Ibid., 240.

¹³ Ibid., 244-5.

are, not only our past but also our present, an experience of our modernity in such a way that we might come out of it transformed.”¹⁴ Though Foucault's work is historical, he does not tell history but makes it intrude into the present to produce a limit-experience. The effect of this technique can be seen in the reaction to *Madness and Civilization*. “The book stops at the very start of the nineteenth century...Despite all this, the book has continued to figure in the public mind as being an attack on contemporary psychiatry. Why? Because for me—and for those who read it and used it—the book constituted a transformation in the historical, theoretical and moral or ethical relationship we have with madness, the mentally ill, the psychiatric institution, and the very truth of psychiatric discourse.”¹⁵ Foucault did not write about contemporary psychiatry, but rather discussed some historical aspects of psychiatry in such a way that people in the present understood their situation differently. History mixed with the present to become an event that set in motion a number of reactions and transformations.

The individual and collective transformative potential of limit-experiences can be seen more extensively in the reaction of people connected with the prison industry to *Discipline and Punish*.

When the book came out, different readers—in particular correctional officers, social workers, and so on—delivered this peculiar judgment. 'The book is paralyzing. It may contain some correct observations, but even so it has clear limits, because it impedes us; it prevents us from going on with our activity.' My reply is that this very reaction proves that the work was successful, that it functioned just as I intended. It shows that people read it as an experience that changed them, that it prevented them from always being the same.¹⁶

Here, a limit-experience rippled through specific sectors of the social fabric. Drawing on his own experiences Foucault composed a history of the prison. This had effects upon academics as well as helped propel Foucault's political activities at the time. The effects of

¹⁴ Ibid., 242.

¹⁵ Ibid., 243.

¹⁶ Ibid., 245-6.

this experience reached even farther, into the ranks of those working in connection to the prison system. The impact of a new degree of intelligibility on daily work activities highlights the intensity and unlivability of a limit-experience while showing how far the collective effect of it extends.

Martin Jay critically defends the relevance of limit-experiences, arguing for their value against both those who seek to use “experience” as the secure foundation for the individual subject and those who see experience as a product of discourse. In particular, he focuses on the reading of limit-experiences given by James Miller in his biography of Foucault. Miller argues that if one looks at both Foucault's life and work, one ends up seeing a single consistent self running throughout. For Jay, this misreading “works to smooth over the palpable tensions, even contradictions, that make the concept of limit-experience so productive and fascinating.”¹⁷ Keeping the productive tensions intact, Jay argues that “[w]hat Foucault seems to mean by limit-experience, then, is a curiously contradictory mixture of self-expansion and self-annihilation, immediate, proactive spontaneity and fictional retrospection, personal inwardness and communal interaction.”¹⁸ This description highlights two important aspects neglected by Miller. First, instead of combining both positive and negative experiences under the unity of a single consistent self, Jay highlights the change that occurs between one self and the other. Second, though Miller does not give much credence to the collective aspect of limit-experiences, it is crucial for Foucault.

Jay likes how limit-experiences help us “be attentive to the various ways in which different concepts of experience – negative as well as positive, limit as well as ordinary, non-subjective as well as subjective – prevent us from ever having a simple foundational version

¹⁷ Martin Jay, “The Limits of Limit-Experience: Bataille and Foucault,” *Constellations* 2:2 (1995): 160-1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 159.

on which to base an epistemology or from which to launch a politics.”¹⁹ He agrees that experience is plural and that no single version can serve as a foundation for truth or politics. This is emphasized by the critical questions with which Jay marks “the limits of limit-experience” to keep it from doing more than being one more kind of experience among others. But Foucault goes further in arguing that an approach to the world that embraces limit-experiences is more appropriate to the kind of beings we are than one that avoids them. He also thinks that in a society with extensive systems of knowledge and control, limit-experiences might be politically critical. But beyond these points, Foucault thinks that limit-experiences take the place of philosophical truth in our historical era. He argues for the importance of limit-experiences in his tribute to Bataille “A Preface to Transgression.”

It was an event when we entered the era defined by the limit and the continual transgression of it.

Perhaps the emergence of sexuality in our culture is an 'event' of multiple values: it is tied to the death of God and to the ontological void which his death fixed at the limit of our thought; it is also tied to the still silent groping apparition of a form of thought in which the interrogation of the limit replaces the search for totality and the act of transgression replaces the movement of contradictions. Finally, it involves the questioning of language by language in a circularity which the 'scandalous' violence of erotic literature, far from ending, displays from its first use of words.²⁰

Understanding this statement requires unpacking four issues: first, what Foucault means by the emergence of sexuality; then, the significance of and interrelation between the death of God; the replacement of that totality with transgressing an internal limit; and the language we use to explain ourselves and that world.

Foucault places his analysis in the domain of sexuality partly because it was an important theme for Bataille and was so central to his own life. Additionally, it remained

¹⁹ Ibid., 168.

²⁰ Michel Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1998), 85.

central through multiple eras, its own changing structure attesting to the changed structure of experience. Finally, erotic literature is one of the best examples of this new mode of experience. Sexuality, though it was transfigured between the Christian and modern eras, nonetheless remained central to both. In the Christian era, all forms of sexuality “lead, without interruption or limit, right to the heart of a divine love of which they were both the outpouring and the source returning upon itself.”²¹ Just as God was the only limit to human experience in that world, so sexuality had no divisions, but always pointed toward the limitless. The modern era is not characterized by a liberation of sexuality, but rather its fragmentation; sexuality does not gain a natural position, but instead becomes denatured. “Since Sade and the death of God, the universe of language has absorbed our sexuality, denatured it, placed it in a void where it establishes its sovereignty and where it incessantly sets up as the Law the limits it transgresses.”²² The emergence of sexuality indicates a change in how we experience the world. Whereas before the world was continuous with the limit on the outside, now the limit is internal to experience, continuously dividing it. These divisions are no longer absolute, but regularly transgressed and reestablished.

As Foucault points out, “sexuality and the death of God are bound to the same experience.”²³

Not that this death should be understood as the end of his historical reign, or as the finally delivered judgment of his nonexistence, but as the now-constant space of our experience. By denying us the limit of the Limitless, the death of God leads to an experience in which nothing may again announce the exteriority of being, and consequently to an experience that is interior and sovereign. But such an experience, for which the death of God is an explosive reality, discloses as its own secret and clarification, its intrinsic finitude, the limitless reign of the Limit, and the emptiness of those excesses in which it spends itself and where it is found wanting. In this sense, the inner experience is, throughout, an experience of the impossible.²⁴

²¹ Ibid., 69.

²² Ibid., 85.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 71.

The death of God is the “now-constant space of our experience.” Implicit in this explanation is Nietzsche's famous section on the Madman in *The Gay Science*. Nietzsche describes the death of God there as a continual falling—a grasping and missing without orientation. The jabs of the atheists in that aphorism, just as those of contemporary “new atheists,” amount to nothing more than banal modes of transgression. A contemporary profession of belief in God can be seen as transgressive against the secular-capitalist background. Indeed, this is part of the force of Kierkegaard's event. In Nietzsche's aphorism, even the madman's attempt to take the death of God seriously is a transgression: the authorities haul him away. Each attempt to secure experience ends up being excessive, comedic, vulgar, or mad, underscoring the fact that we no longer have “the limit of the limitless” and instead exist under “the limitless reign of the limit.” Such attempts and experiences are not, for all that, either equivalent or pointless. That this form of experience is now interior and sovereign means that finitude is now confronted in various guises. Though we cannot continuously live at the limit, our experience is constituted by occasionally passing through its limits. If this contradictory experience is “impossible,” then it is this characteristic that Foucault orients himself toward and intensifies in a limit-experience.

The death of God is an event that keeps occurring; it is manifest each time a limit is transgressed. This attests to the shifting limits that constitute experience. “The death of God restores us not to a limited and positivistic world but to a world exposed by the experience of its limits, made and unmade by that excess which transgresses it.”²⁵ Just as removing sexuality from a Christian context and placing it within scientific or erotic discourses does not return eroticism to its true nature, so the world is not made natural by the death of God.

²⁵ Ibid., 72.

We do not experience it as a limited place subject to positivist explanations and modes of being. Rather, what is made possible is a sense of the role of the event in life: the making and unmaking of the world. Limit-experiences unmake parts of the world, refashioning them with different limits.

Foucault seeks to gain a sense of this process and even to shape it through transgression. “Transgression carries the limit right to the limit of its being; transgression forces the limit to face the fact of its imminent disappearance, to find itself in what it excludes...to experience its positive truth in its downward fall.”²⁶ The limits that constitute experience are forms of exclusion. They exclude people, other ways of being, other modes of thought and otherness in general, but by this very exclusion they shape experience. Transgression is a way not only of realizing how the limit owes its being to this exclusion, but also of experiencing something that is excluded. Limits and exclusions are thus reworked through transgression, realizing their existence only through this process of destruction and recreation.

This is what Foucault calls “nonpositive affirmation.” “Transgression contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being—affirms the limitlessness into which it leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time. But, correspondingly, this affirmation contains nothing positive: no content can bind it, since, by definition, no limit can possibly restrict it. Perhaps it is simply an affirmation of division...only retaining that in it which may designate the existence of difference.”²⁷ Nonpositive affirmation affirms the limit in three ways: it affirms the uncertain and insecure act of transgressing the limit, it affirms a world built upon arbitrary limits, and it affirms limited being, an existence which can develop only through transgressing one limited mode of being to move to the next. Because of this

²⁶ Ibid., 73.

²⁷ Ibid., 74.

limited being, no position can be secured or made transcendent. Rather it is a process of working through difference.

Transgression and the ethic of nonpositive affirmation are best carried out through a mode of being that actively engages limit-experiences. Foucault develops this mode of being, seeking “an experience that has the power 'to implicate (and to question) everything without possible respite',” since it founds “a philosophy which questions itself upon the existence of the limit.”²⁸ A philosophy of the limit-experience reworks its own foundations. It does so out of a desire to experience that which is excluded, which is also that which is possible. Its primary orientation is to see what kinds of existence are possible. To do this it continues to interrogate and rework limits, divisions, and markers of difference that structure the world. Thus it interrogates itself at the place from which the world receives its consistency. “In our day, would not the instantaneous play of the limit and of transgression be the essential test for a thought that centers on the "origin," for that form of thought to which Nietzsche dedicated us from the beginning of his works and one that would be, absolutely and in the same motion, a Critique and an Ontology, an understanding that comprehends both finitude and being?”²⁹ Transgression is a philosophy, a process, a method, and a way of life that undertakes self-critique through limit-experiences to transform the subject and the world.

Transgression works from a particular place within language to express its mode of engagement. It is a matter of “trying to speak of this experience and [of] making it speak from the depths where its language fails, from precisely the place where words escape it, where the subject who speaks has just vanished.”³⁰ Because the transgressive form of thought refuses to limit itself to any particular way of being in the world, it has to work with

²⁸ Ibid., 75. In the second phrase, I have used the word “upon” from the original translation by Daniel F.

Bouchard and Sherry Simon rather than the word “about” to which it was changed in the Rabinow edition.

²⁹ Foucault, “Preface to Transgression,” 75.

³⁰ Ibid., 77.

language in a new way. The problem becomes one of describing an event: the limit-experience in which the subject vanishes. Foucault thinks that the work of people like Sade, Bataille, Klossowski, and Blanchot makes important progress in this direction. We have also seen how Foucault's particular way of writing history such that it becomes an experience for the present that produces a subjective change in people worked to achieve this effect.

With transgression, the limit is internal and so the effects of a language of transgression should come about in the same way. This means that the philosopher acknowledges that language cannot overcome the limits of being. Such an acknowledgment may be strengthened through the disclosure of other unknowns that elude the philosopher.

Most of all, he discovers that he is not always lodged in his language in the same fashion, and that in the location from which a subject had traditionally spoken in philosophy...a void has been hollowed out in which a multiplicity of speaking subjects are joined and severed, combined and excluded...In short, the experience of the philosopher who finds, not outside his language (the result of an external accident or imaginary exercise) but at the inner core of its possibilities, the transgression of his philosophical being; and thus, the nondialectical language of the limit that only arises in transgressing the one who speaks."³¹

Language dissolves the traditional philosophical subject into a multiplicity of voices and experiences. The language of philosophy must now find ways to indicate the unstable limits that give form to this multiplicity. Foucault thinks that this language needs to be rooted in personal experience. When he writes about disciplinary systems or *epistemes*, we experience the vanishing of the subject amidst a flux of processes, institutions, and knowledges. But as the next section will show, his ability to make intelligible the insecurity of the subject and the seeming solidity of these institutions arose from his own limit-experiences. For transgression, it is not enough to be able to point to other possibilities; language has to bring out the consistency produced by internal limits.

Limit-experiences are more important to Foucault than Martin Jay makes them out to be. For the latter they are simply one way among others of questioning both

³¹ Ibid., 79-80.

transcendental and discursive takes on subjectivity and experience. Foucault, however, sees them as a particularly relevant mode of shaking up the self and society in the contemporary era. When modes of experience are composed around specific limits, it is transgression which both brings us closest to the “truth” of our era and gives us the greatest facility for moving through it and experiencing its different possibilities. As we shall see, Foucault's investigations into systems of knowledge and care of the self extend this philosophy and make it more accessible.

Micro and Macro Events

Foucault's *The Order of Things* was made possible by a limit-experience. “This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought – *our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography – breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other.”³² The passage simply describes a fictional classification of animals and yet it shatters Foucault's thought. On one hand it is a moment of clarity in which knowledge becomes limited to culture, place, and time. On the other, it opens upon the instability of difference. The effect does not last a moment, but continues to threaten the established order of knowledge. As a limit-experience, it both clarifies Foucault's condition and makes that condition tremble. “The thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of

³² Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, New York: Vintage, 1994. xv.

thinking *that*.”³³ Yet this impossible limit pushes the possible, impelling reconsideration of established ways of knowing. *The Order of Things* is one manifestation of that possibility.

Such an experience opens an aspect of order that tends to go unrecognized. On one side, there are “codes of culture” that structure language, perception, exchanges, practices, and values and on the other, philosophical and scientific theories of order that validate those codes. Between these two sides, Borges reveals that “there exists, below the level of [a culture's] spontaneous orders, things that are in fact themselves capable of being ordered, that belong to a certain unspoken order; the fact, in short, that order *exists*.”³⁴ To become aware that order exists—rather than being synonymous with existence itself—is to open the question of its contingency. While at a philosophical or scientific level, one could criticize the legitimacy of some aspects of established orders, the Borges experience draws out the fact that order is a chance construction.

This notion of order leads to a different mode of criticism. “This middle region, then, in so far as it makes manifest the modes of being of order, can be posited as the most fundamental of all: anterior to words, perceptions, and gestures, which are then taken to be more or less exact, more or less happy, expressions of it (which is why this experience of order in its pure primary state always plays a critical role).”³⁵ The experience of order in its pure state is not the experience of a real order underlying everything, but the experience of the limits and thus the reality of a specific order. Gesture and taste as well as the philosophical theories embedded in them appear as partial expressions of that order. This is how Foucault is able to show that practices of wage labor and Smith's and Marx's interpretations of those practices are based on complementary assumptions according to

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., xx.

³⁵ Ibid., xxi.

which labor creates value. While Smith justifies and Marx criticizes these practices, Foucault tries to push us to a point at which we might begin to see how those complementary experiences are constructed. This form of criticism, as with the limit-experience it is built upon, uncovers the conditions of possibility of an order and some experiences that open other possibilities.

Foucault demonstrates this by linking the micro-event of his Borges limit-experience with the macro-events that dissolved and produced a series of western *epistemes*, including that of today.³⁶ Just as Foucault's mode of being was interrupted by reading Borges, so have the *epistemes* structuring perception and understanding been interrupted by great events. But the two are connected: the micro-event of a limit experience prepares one to perceive epistemic macro-events. Foucault does not 'explain' the transition between different epistemes. The terms to do so are not available. He brings us to the point where we can experience the limits of one and the mobilization of another. In doing so he suggests that the contemporary *episteme* is defined by the event of man, who "is probably no more than a kind of rift in the order of things, or, in any case, a configuration whose outlines are determined by the new position he has so recently taken up in the field of knowledge."³⁷ Responding to the event of man, Foucault tries to help us connect our experiences of order and dissonance to the larger order and dissonances in which we live.

If we can perceive the outlines of the modern event of man, we can now perhaps begin to move beyond it. Foucault sums up this critical movement: "From the limit-experience...to the order of things...It was upon this threshold [of modernity] that the strange figure of knowledge called man first appeared and revealed a space proper to the human science. In attempting to uncover the deepest strata of Western culture, I am

³⁶ Ibid., xxi-xxii.

³⁷ Ibid., xxiii.

restoring to our silent and apparently immobile soil its rifts, its instability, its flaws; and it is the same ground that is once more stirring under our feet.”³⁸ Limit-experiences distance us from our own modes of being, allowing us to examine both our own practices and the truths by which we live. Reading how the Classical era became the Modern one, we see that dislocations in the classical era already began to transform us and the order we inhabit. But these refer to just two levels on which events occur. In fact, Foucault shows that transformations are produced by interconnected events occurring on a number of different scales.

Connections between Events across Scale

For Foucault, an event crosses different temporal and existential scales. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, he theorizes how different kinds of events are connected to show what limits and possibilities an event introduces into an established mode of living. “Archaeology does not deny the possibility of new statements in correlation with 'external' events. Its task is to show under what condition a correlation can exist between them, and what precisely it consists of (what are its limits, its form, its code, its law of possibility). It does not try to avoid the mobility of discourses that makes them move to the rhythm of events; it tries to free the level at which it is set in motion – what might be called the level of 'evential' *engagement*.”³⁹ An event does not guarantee novelty; sometimes existing practices and ways of knowing can absorb or solidify it. Nonetheless, the event does present an opportunity for new ways of being to gestate. Each instance is judged according to the context in which it occurs and in relation to other actual and potential events. Focusing on the event is thus mode of historical analysis and an ethos, a way of searching for events and the new possibilities that they open.

³⁸ Ibid., xxiv. My brackets.

³⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage, 2010), 168.

Finally, it is a form of practice that seeks to develop alternative ways to engage ourselves through events.

Foucault outlines four historical registers of events according to what kind of transformation each makes possible. These can be roughly defined as statement, concept, rule, and episteme.⁴⁰ This evental mode of explanation moves beyond traditional causality. “It is not enough simply to indicate changes, and to relate them immediately to the theological, aesthetic model of creation...or to the psychological model of the act of consciousness...or to the biological model of evolution.”⁴¹ Foucault moves away from a self-sufficient model of change, which would isolate transformations to a singular type and level of causality. Such notions leave change as a blank and unexamined concept that fails to describe what happens. Instead, Foucault suggests substituting transformation for change.

We must define precisely what these changes consist of: that is, substitute for an undifferentiated reference to *change* – which is both a general container for all events and the abstract principle of their succession – the analysis of *transformations*...Rather than refer to the living force of change (as if it were its own principle), archaeology tries to establish the system of transformations that constitute 'change'; it tries to develop this empty, abstract notion, with a view to according it the analysable status of transformation.⁴²

The idea of change reduces all events to the same form; it adopts universal modes of explanation rather than allowing events to call those modes into question as well. Moreover, it places them within a limited temporal frame of successive occurrences.

By proposing different levels of events that bring about various degrees of transformation, Foucault shows that events connect different temporal speeds and spatial scales: these overlap and interact rather than simply expressing a flat interruption in chronological succession. Thus a shift in the form of punishment in connection to changing cultural representations of crime and a new technology of observation resulted in a new state

⁴⁰ Ibid., 171-3.

⁴¹ Ibid., 172.

⁴² Ibid., 172-3.

practice of surveillance. Rather than referring to abstract change, Foucault connects dispersed temporalities and spatial scales to show the conditions and possibilities for an event. While Marx was able to push a theory that broke out of the frame of wealth accumulation as a primary and legitimate goal, he still relied on the labor theory of value, which continued to have explanatory power in economics. Some of the events that Foucault explores occur on a larger timescale than the events defined by Marx's innovations. Foucault's point is that one can best understand the change that the event brings about by looking at the transformations that connect those events. Even large epistemic events do not change everything since continuities subsist within them. It is a matter of discerning how the continuous and the discontinuous remain in tension with each other.

This approach to the event has a number of effects. First, “archaeology disarticulates the synchrony of breaks, just as it destroyed the abstract unity of change and event.”⁴³ Absent a unitary notion of change evenly distributed along a chronological history, the event can no longer be seen as a self-sufficient, temporally confined break. Instead, transformations occur at different levels and temporalities. In short, history is freed from a uniform chronology of linear succession and the event is freed from an absolute image of discontinuity.

This also changes the notion of the subject, as Foucault explains: “It is an attempt...to show that a change in the order of discourse does not presuppose 'new ideas', a little invention and creativity, a different mentality, but transformations in a practice, perhaps also in neighbouring practices, and in their common articulation. I have not denied – far from it – the possibility of changing discourse: I have deprived the sovereignty of the

⁴³ Ibid., 175.

subject of the exclusive and instantaneous right to do so.”⁴⁴ In moving beyond the sovereignty of the subject, Foucault undermines its unitary and self-sufficient status. No longer can we hold to a simplified view of the individual who makes things happen in accord with his wishes. Now the individual emerges as a site or node at which temporally dispersed knowledges and practices meet. Much of what the individual thinks, says, and does is a matter of contending and overlapping cultural codes of truth and regimes of action being exercised through that particular node. The event becomes a critical part of the subject as well. If the individual does not exclusively determine himself, particularly with regard to transformations, it is because events also express their effects through individuals and provide opportunities for the individual to help shape transformations in himself and his society. Furthermore, just as events on different levels are entangled, so transformations in individual practices are entangled on multiple levels.

Finally, it is worth noting that Foucault sees this shift in how to approach events as political.

What political status can you give to discourse if you see in it merely a thin transparency that shines for an instant at the limit of things and thoughts? Has not the practice of revolutionary discourse and scientific discourse in Europe over the past two hundred years freed you from this idea that words are wind...What is that fear which makes you reply in terms of consciousness when someone talks to you about a practice, its conditions, its rules, and its historical transformations? What is that fear which makes you seek, beyond all boundaries, ruptures, shifts, and divisions, the great historico-transcendental destiny of the Occident? It seems to me that the only reply to this question is a political one.⁴⁵

Foucault contends that the refusal of approaches which challenge a progressive-teleological history and the unified subject are political refusals. Against this refusal, Foucault seeks to elucidate the political weight of different discourses. He wants us to adopt an approach that emphasizes not just the significance that discourses, knowledges, and practices have in our

⁴⁴ Ibid., 209.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 209-10.

lives, but also the events that, rather than only destabilizing essential ways of being, also enable possible transitions to different ways of being. What Foucault learns from the political and scientific history of Europe is that modes of being shift contingently and in more or less temporally diffuse ways. Political innovations can thus be brought about through small or large interruptions that are connected across scale.

Waking Beyond the Human

The event that inaugurates the modern *episteme* in which we still live is defined by the invention of man.⁴⁶ By this Foucault means that humans are both an object of positive knowledge and that in relation to which knowledge of all other things is constituted. It is not just man, however, that defines modern knowledge, but “man and his doubles.”⁴⁷ Modern knowledge is structured around a reflexive twist according to which man is “a being whose nature...is to know nature.”⁴⁸ Man is part of the natural order and his role within it is to understand that order. Though his knowledge is partial, what he has discovered attests to the validity and substance of the laws of that natural order. In turn, the existence of the things about which man knows attests to the reality of this 'natural order' and thereby grounds the truth of his knowledge. Man is thus the link between a natural order which can be known and the knowledge of that order, anchoring the first and producing the second.

The effect of this doubling can be seen in the structure of natural laws. The solidity of man as a knowing subject and the verity of the knowledge he has accumulated receive their positivity from the existence of the laws of life, language and labor. These are the laws into which man was born and to which he is subject, but which he also discovers and understands. “Hence the interminable to and fro of a double system of reference: if man's

⁴⁶ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 317, 345.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 303.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 310.

knowledge is finite, it is because he is trapped, without possibility of liberation, within the positive contents of language, labour, and life; and inversely, if life, labour, and language may be posited in their positivity, it is because knowledge has finite forms.”⁴⁹ Man discovers the world because he assumes that he is the kind of being that can do so, and the world that he discovers conforms to the presumed capacities of that being.

Foucault calls this condition that of the “enslaved sovereign.”⁵⁰ Humans are trapped in this system insofar as they only 'challenge' the limits of the modern order by expanding them through producing 'new' knowledge. Phenomenology may not secure either the knowing subject or the object of knowledge, but it still traces the relations that bind objects to the human. The unthought is not that which questions or undermines the human, but the hidden side that supplements it. Empirical investigations point back toward the transcendental capacities of the knowing subject. In each case, man pushes toward the limit only to find an expression of his own being. Man is the enslaved sovereign because even though he is the knower of nature, it is only the texture of his experience, his own nature, that he explores.

Even though each side of the doubling is stabilized through the other, the system of references itself “is really an unstable one; nothing allows it to contemplate itself...it also promises the very infinity it refuses....”⁵¹ As long as historically limited man refers to an expanding system of knowledge, he continues to assume the primacy of a knowing subject. As long as knowledge can refer to existing man as the center of nature's self-knowledge, then it continues to promise complete knowledge, projecting forward a single horizon that we can approach but never fully realize. Foucault refers to this as being caught between the “order

⁴⁹ Ibid., 316.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 312.

⁵¹ Ibid., 314.

of reduction” and the “order of promise.”⁵² Though man experiences this inquiry as freedom, he is trapped between knowledge and experience in such a way that discoveries on one side already correspond to what was presumed to be possible on the other side. What is avoided in this back and forth is the very fact of man's limited nature.

Foucault refers to the combined forces of these habits of thought, ontological presuppositions, and existential precautions which resist destabilizing events as “the anthropological sleep.”

The anthropological configuration of modern philosophy consists in doubling over dogmatism, in dividing it into two different levels each lending support to and limiting the other: the pre-critical analysis of what man is in his essence becomes the analytic of everything that can, in general, be presented to man's experience...a sleep – so deep that thought experiences it paradoxically as vigilance, so wholly does it confuse the circularity of a dogmatism folded over upon itself in order to find a basis for itself within itself with the agility and anxiety of a radically philosophical thought.⁵³

Meticulous empirical observation and rigorous transcendental formalization may seem independent and even opposed projects. Yet what Foucault shows is that they move in a co-dependent circle around the figure of the human in which neither uncovers something that challenges that figure. It is not just a matter of the discourse deployed in this *episteme*, but of its “pathos” as well. The intensity, care, and rigor with which knowledge is pursued also protects the human from knowledge which would unsettle it, shielding it from the disruption of the event. This is a dogmatism in which repetition is experienced as being radical.

Yet there is another side to structuring knowledge around man. “What first comes to light in the nineteenth century is a simple form of human historicity – the fact that man as such is exposed to the event.”⁵⁴ The event that produces man also exposes him to events in an unprecedented way. If modern knowledge and existence are constituted primarily through

⁵² Ibid., 320.

⁵³ Ibid., 341.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 370.

the human, then events that interrupt and modify modern knowledge and practices also erode and transform the human. The human is exposed to the event at the same time that the human *episteme* tries to ward it off, both threatening and constituting the human.

At the foundation of all the empirical positivities, and of everything that can indicate itself as a concrete limitation of man's existence, we discover a finitude – which is in a sense the same: it is marked by the spatiality of the body, the yawning of desire, and the time of language; and yet it is radically other: in this sense, the limitation is expressed not as a determination imposed upon man from outside (because he has a nature or a history), but as a fundamental finitude which rests on nothing but its own existence as fact, and opens upon the positivity of all concrete limitation.⁵⁵

Finitude determines both the boundaries of positive knowledge as well as the bare existence of the being constituted as human. On one hand, that which is beyond the limit continues to lure human activity. On the other hand, a more critical approach engages the concrete limitation of human finitude rather than viewing finitude as an as-yet-unreached horizon. This suggests the importance of limit-experiences that dissolve and transform the subject. They are events that can break out of established trajectories of progress and investigation. In reconstituting the subject, they pass through the heart of finitude, rather than the boundaries that it establishes.

To begin to wake from the anthropological sleep, Foucault puts the event at the center of his engagement with the modern *episteme*, which requires asking a different and “aberrant” kind of question. “This question would be: Does man really exist? To imagine, for an instant, what the world and thought and truth might be if man did not exist, is considered to be merely indulging in paradox.”⁵⁶ Just as for Kierkegaard the event that produces faith is aberrant and paradoxical to understanding, so for Foucault the event that challenges the given epistemic model is aberrant and paradoxical. Because of how deeply rooted the human is, breaking away from it cannot be done methodically or logically. Rather,

⁵⁵ Ibid., 315.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 322.

it requires an imaginative, illogical, confusing, and potentially productive project of questioning. Such questions are warded off by those who resist the event and embraced by those trying to engage it. The latter supplement their questioning with experimental action upon selves and politics at those limit points of knowledge.

Foucault argues that Nietzsche's thought is an event that challenges the modern mode of living and knowing.

It is easy to see why Nietzsche's thought should have had, and still has for us, such a disturbing power when it introduces in the form of an imminent event, the Promise-Threat, the notion that man would soon be no more – but would be replaced by the superman; in a philosophy of the Return, this meant that man had long since disappeared and would continue to disappear, and that our modern thought about man, our concern for him, our humanism, were all sleeping serenely over the threatening rumble of his non-existence.⁵⁷

Nietzsche challenges the promise of complete knowledge with the “promise-threat” of the end of the era of the human. The promise is that the end of the modern episteme will come in any case and is already underway. The threat is that this entails the end of the human as we know it. The events explored in chapter two attest to this: the seasonal interruption and direction of life, the affective intensity of the Return that shatters the subject, and the event of the human as only a minor event for nature. What is crucial is that the self-sufficient human is undermined and the lure of transformation suggested.

Thinking the event as Nietzsche did requires taking a risk. “Even before prescribing, suggesting a future, saying what must be done, even before exhorting or merely sounding an alarm, thought, at the level of its existence, in its very dawning, is in itself an action – a perilous act.”⁵⁸ Not only plotting a moral course of action, but the act of thinking itself can be dangerous. The awareness of this is what separates those who produce changes in thought and action within the *episteme* without being aware of the implications, and those

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 328.

who are aware of the power of thought and actively orient themselves towards the sort of events that it can produce. The former reproduce false development while the latter risk the comfort, security, and regularity of the existing episteme for emancipation.

The event is risky because the attempt to think and express it already opens the door to instability and change. “What is essential is that [modern] thought, both for itself and in the density of its workings, should be both knowledge and a modification of what it knows, reflection and a transformation of the mode of being of that on which it reflects...causing man's own being to undergo a change by that very fact, since it is deployed in the distance between them.”⁵⁹ Human knowledge and modes of living are tied together and a modification of one affects the other. Foucault crystallizes an important point out of this. “Modern thought has never, in fact, been able to propose a morality. But the reason for this is not because it is pure speculation; on the contrary, modern thought, from its inception and in its very density, is a certain mode of action.”⁶⁰ Approaches rooted in the modern episteme expand the existing way of knowledge, reciprocally entrenching anthropocentric modes of living. Alternatively, approaches that focus on the event warp, efface, and transfigure the human to create new modes of living and knowing. Thought is already a morality which is embodied in individual actions and social processes. This sets the stage for Foucault's later attempts to explore an ethic that breaks with Kantian and neo-Kantian renderings of morality.

In *The Order of Things*, however, Foucault stops at pointing to a few characteristics in three counter-sciences that have already begun a transformation away from the anthropological by attending to the event. These three sciences are: psychoanalysis, ethnology, and linguistics/literature. In fact, Foucault seems to see *The Order of Things* as a

⁵⁹ Ibid., 327.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 328.

critical combination of the three in a form of linguistics that draws upon the most important aspects of psychoanalysis and ethnology.⁶¹

The first thing to note about the counter-sciences is that they “form an undoubted and inexhaustible treasure-hoard of experiences and concepts, and above all a perpetual principle of dissatisfaction, of calling into question, of criticism and contestation of what may seem, in other respects, to be established.”⁶² This calling into question refuses the truth of positive knowledge to investigate the conditions of possibility for that knowledge. The experiences that it draws upon are limit-experiences. “In fact, what illuminates the space of their discourse is much more the historical *a priori* of all the science of man – those great caesuras, furrows, and dividing-lines which traces man's outline in the Western *episteme* and made him a possible area of knowledge.”⁶³ The counter-sciences take the transformations out of which man came to be the center of knowledge as their starting point.

The first characteristic of these counter-sciences is the critical examination of the conditions of possibility for man's mode of being. Unlike other sciences which always work toward the limit, expanding it as they proceed, the counter-sciences point to the limit as an expression of finitude. Psychoanalysis does this by freeing the individual from desire and “making him understand that one day we will die.”⁶⁴ Ethnology is based on “an absolutely singular event” which exposes the foundation but also contingency of all foundations in the synchronological comparison of cultures.⁶⁵ The second characteristic is a positive orientation toward the event as a break that expresses human and epistemic finitude. Foucault highlights

⁶¹ Ibid., 379-81.

⁶² Ibid., 373.

⁶³ Ibid., 378.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 376.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 376-8.

points where death is a necessary but overcoded and obscured event to reconfigure the way we live.

As a more specific engagement with the event, the counter-sciences incorporate limit-experiences to portray life in a certain way. “The very hollowness of our existence is outlined in relief; the finitude upon the basis of which we are, and think, and know, is suddenly there before us: an existence at once real and impossible, thought that we cannot think, an object for our knowledge that always eludes it.”⁶⁶ A limit-experience makes the reality of the order in which we live more intense while at the same time making it impossible. The particular kind of subject that we are loses its consistency, and we begin to become other. Psychoanalysis points to “truth and its alterity;” ethnology brings us “face to face with all other cultures as well as our own.”⁶⁷ In the limit-experience, established subjectivities shatter. The counter-sciences “address themselves to that which constitutes [man's] outer limits...they dissolve man.”⁶⁸ The third characteristic is the use of limit-experiences that dissolve the subject.

Fourth, the counter-sciences all incorporate an element of practice or technique. Psychoanalysis employs a “praxis.”⁶⁹ Linguistic analysis proceeds not by explanation, but by “perception.”⁷⁰ This is particularly important to note for those who see Foucault's work as a matter of description, mental games, or discourses that imagine a world composed solely of language. What Foucault emphasizes is that a knowledge, a notion of truth, a disposition, and an ethos all are tied to actually existing habits and practices carried out by people every day. Adjustments to routines can change ways of perceiving, thinking and evaluating, and

⁶⁶ Ibid., 375.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 375, 377.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 379.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 376.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 382.

new thoughts and information can change behavior. *Epistemes* do not just show how humans have thought about the world, but how they have lived in it.

Drawing on these elements, Foucault combines a number of challenges running from Nietzsche to contemporary literature into a general approach. Indeed, for him they all indicate the possibility of a future event that would transition out of the human *episteme* and into a new one.⁷¹ Yet he says that we can do no more than “sense the possibility – without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises.”⁷² This highlights the importance of an ethos of the event. If, as we saw with Nietzsche, we can only sense the possibility of such events, a more refined sensitivity toward them is necessary. We should try to be more aware of contributing factors as well as potential transformations and how our different ways of thinking and behaving feed into such an event. Though Foucault outlines some elements of this ethos in *The Order of Things*, it is not until his more explicit consideration in the *Hermeneutics of the Subject* that a robust ethos is forged.

Spiritual Resolve: The Politics of Truth as a Way of Life

Foucault's earlier work shows that the event is neither apparent nor easy to encounter. One may need to adopt an archeological approach to find its traces and connections or push experience to the limit to engage it. When Foucault begins developing the theme of ethos in his later work, it seems to be because a particular character is necessary to locate, connect to, and respond to an event. Neither attentiveness to potential and dispersed events, nor analysis of the event that implicates the researcher in the object of study are sufficient. The

⁷¹ It could be that we can see extensions of the elements that Foucault already isolated being more vigorously incorporated into new materialist philosophies, various scientific approaches which place uncertainty and limits to knowledge at the center of their approach, approaches that emphasize non-human elements of the world, and some forms of complexity theory. These elements may be more serious challenges to the human *episteme* or even nascent expressions of a different *episteme* altogether.

⁷² Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 387.

event must be worked into the constitution of the self as a node of thought and action. Thus caring for oneself is a matter not just of locating and responding to events, but of producing them. Working on the self through the event acclimatizes the self to a world that is fraught with loss and change, primes the self to respond to an event, and lays a necessary foundation for political engagement, experimentation, and resistance.

It may be helpful to begin by examining the kind of subject Foucault has in mind when he writes about caring for oneself. Žižek gives a problematic but not uncommon characterization of Foucault's notion of the subject. "With Foucault, we have a turn against that universalist ethics which results in a kind of aestheticization of ethics: each subject must, without any support from universal rules, build his own mode of self-mastery; he must harmonize the antagonism of the powers within himself – invent himself, so to speak, produce himself as a subject, find his own particular art of living."⁷³ On this account, Foucault rejects universal ethics but retains a concept of the autonomous subject with a will sufficient to mastering itself. The result is a subject that deliberately engages in projects to produce a harmonious and complete self.⁷⁴

In fact, the subject is composed of a number of different elements that do not function harmoniously together. Foucault envisions the subject as composed of knowledge, but also practices, impulses, truths, principles, and aspirations among other things. Highlighting the way that prescriptive principles of conduct function unevenly in relation to knowledge, experience, and desire, Foucault cites Plutarch: "You must learn the principles in such a constant way that whenever your desires, appetites, and fears awake like barking dogs, the *logos* will speak like the voice of the master who silences his dogs with a single cry.' Here

⁷³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 2.

⁷⁴ For similar misunderstandings of Foucault, see James Miller's *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993) or Alexander Nehamas's *The Art of Living* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998).

we have the idea of a *logos* functioning, as it were, without any intervention on your part; you have become the *logos*, or the *logos* has become you.”⁷⁵ Here, Foucault points to the knowledge which conducts apply, bodily and emotional experience, and conducts themselves, none of which rule the subject uniformly. The self is not an independent entity, but the interplay of frictive elements. Existing desires and habits, decisions to pursue certain goals, repeating a practice under calm conditions, and a surprising event all combine to produce a response. This response may not be unitary, but contain elements that intervene late, or were not as strongly present as those that overtly manifested, altering the execution but not necessarily the aim of the response.

Foucault's subject thus contains a number of agonistic processes and sedimentations. The idea is not that one cares for the self in order to become internally harmonious or to produce one's authentic self. Rather, care of the self is an ongoing process that seeks to modify various aspects of a fragmented dynamic self, opening it to experimentation, without a guarantee of what the outcome will be. “Taking care of oneself will be to take care of the self insofar as it is the 'subject of' a certain number of things: the subject of instrumental action, of relationships with other people, of behavior and attitudes in general, and the subject also of relationships to oneself.”⁷⁶ The aim of care of the self is clarified by its connection to limit-experiences, which produce a different person. There is no complete subject to be achieved. By applying certain principles, disciplines and practices, the self can become otherwise.

Caring for the self is a matter of developing an ethos adequate to shaping and maintaining this complex interplay in the self to respond to events. “*Ēthos*...was a mode of

⁷⁵ Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of Self as a Practice of Freedom,” *Ethics Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 285-6.

⁷⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2005), 57.

being for the subject, along with a certain way of acting, a way visible to others. A person's *ethos* was evident in his clothing, appearance, gait, in the calm with which he responded to every event, and so on...But extensive work by the self on the self is required for this practice of freedom to take shape in an *ethos* that is good, beautiful, honorable, estimable, memorable, and exemplary.”⁷⁷ Caring for oneself tries to free the subject from the turbulence of its eddies and swirls by forging an ethos with a consistency that extends from walking to larger events that interrupt life. Kierkegaard also thinks that someone who experiences an event and responds to it with faith expresses a particular appearance and gait that are linked to their underlying mode of being. While for Kierkegaard, faith produces a singular mode of being, for Foucault, this will always be incomplete and continue to change. In both cases, however, the focus is how to bring a person's character into contact with the event in a way that changes that person's mode of being, all the way down to the manner of walking.

Foucault's most thorough examination of how to care for oneself occurs in his lecture series *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*. Though these lectures are an examination of ancient Greek and Roman thought, Foucault frames them as speaking to our present situation. Caring for oneself is “an event in thought...that is still significant for our modern mode of being subjects.”⁷⁸ Here again, Foucault writes history in a way that makes it an event for the present. On one level, he shows how the care of the self was an event in the ancient world because of how widespread it was and the transformations it underwent over the centuries. On another level, he interrupts modern experience with his discussion of this history of care of the self.

Broadly speaking, the modern mode of being that Foucault wants to interrupt is defined by what he calls the “Cartesian moment,” which is not a specific point, but a gradual

⁷⁷ Foucault, “Ethics of Concern of Self,” 286.

⁷⁸ Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 9.

transition. This “modern age of the history of truth begins when knowledge itself and knowledge alone gives access to the truth.”⁷⁹ Foucault thinks that care of the self draws upon the spiritual dimension of subjectivity to produce a different relation to truth than that of knowledge. “The *epimeleia heautou* (care of the self) designates precisely the set of conditions of spirituality, the set of transformations of the self, that are necessary conditions for having access to the truth.”⁸⁰ Foucault hopes that these lectures interrupt the self-sufficient subject of knowledge and reorient it toward a broader spectrum of being along the spiritual dimension.

Foucault does not suggest a direct connection between ancient spiritual techniques and those which may be useful in the present. I will, however, point to five characteristics that seem critical for caring for oneself today. First, it is important to adopt a positive relation to interruptive events by incorporating the expectation of periodic surprise into one's existential ethos. Second, caring for oneself produces a transformation in the mode of being of the subject. Third, this transformation also changes one's relation to the world. Fourth, it produces a truth that takes the form of an art of living. Fifth, care of the self is political. These characteristics outline a particular ethos of the event that may be helpful today.

The question of the attitude adopted toward events is at the heart of the care of the self. This begins with situating ourselves in relation to other people and the world by examining what affects us, how it does so, and how we have responded to such provocations.⁸¹ Foucault gives an example from Epictetus, who “proposes the exercise that could be called memory-exercise: recalling an event—either an historic event or one that

⁷⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 17.

⁸¹ Ibid., 459.

took place more or less recently in our life—and then, with regard to this event, saying to ourselves: But in what did this event consist? What was its nature? What form of action can this event have on me? To what extent do I depend on it? To what extent am I free from it? What judgment must I bring to bear on it and what attitude should I adopt towards it?”⁸²

Such questioning gauges the interruptive impact of the event to see to what extent it governs a resistant self and to what extent the self is able to respond freely to it. The aim is to make oneself freer and more responsive through repeating the exercise with different events and coming to expect such interruptions.

Foucault uses salvation, present in both Christian and ancient traditions, to contrast two attitudes that one might adopt toward the event.

The meaning of 'saving oneself' is not at all reducible to something like the drama of an event that allows one's existence to be commuted from death to life, mortality to immortality, evil to good...It is not with reference to a dramatic event or to the action of a different agency that you are saved; saving yourself is an activity that takes place throughout life and that is executed solely by the subject himself...[it] consists in the fact that salvation renders you inaccessible to misfortunes, disorders, and all that external accidents and events may produce in the soul.⁸³

For Christianity, an otherworldly event produces an otherworldly salvation through a dramatic occurrence. For the ancients, one must orient themselves toward worldly events such that they can be responded to, avoided, or dealt with in a way that prevents the event from capturing the self. Foucault lists some of the negative events that ancient philosophers were concerned with: shipwrecks, earthquakes, fires, encounters with bandits, death threats, imprisonment, and enslavement.⁸⁴ Today we might add climate change to this list. Whereas Christianity locates a break in the self that is saved, several of the ancients sought to produce

⁸² Ibid., 298.

⁸³ Ibid., 183-4.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 449.

a break in the attitude and means through which the subject is engaged with the world.⁸⁵ We can see more clearly, then, how the care of the self is oriented toward building a mode of behavior appropriate for carrying out life in this world.⁸⁶

Foucault highlights different sets of techniques used to produce certain orientations toward events. These include attempts to understand how all events are ontologically good insofar as they are part of a rational order,⁸⁷ producing a disposition of detachment from events,⁸⁸ preparing oneself by regularly imagining that the worst events will surely happen and even that they are already happening,⁸⁹ and developing “a steadfast soul, serene in adversity, a soul that accepts every event as if it were desired.”⁹⁰ Many of these techniques are interesting in that they explore, modify and distort representations of the world in order to reconfigure the impulses and internal relations of the self. This shares some affinity with both Kierkegaard’s “volatizations” of the self and Klossowski’s take on Nietzsche’s use of simulacra. Though Nietzsche and Kierkegaard are interested in more passionate and volatile movements of the soul than the ancient Greeks and Romans, the methods pursued by each are similar.

I will give a bit more attention to the theory of *paraskenē* that Foucault examines because it seems to be a particularly relevant practice (*askēsis*) for changing our relation to the event. *Paraskenē* is not a matter of renunciation but of practices that actively equip and prepare the self to better encounter unforeseen events. The emphasis on active training is made through a comparison with the athlete. “The Stoic athlete, the athlete of ancient

⁸⁵ Ibid., 212.

⁸⁶ The discussion of Kierkegaard from the first chapter has many points of connection with Foucault’s notion of care of the self, such as a spiritual transformation which leads one to the conditions for truth. While Kierkegaard does adhere in some ways to the Christian version of the event, in particular that it be divine, he focuses much less on salvation in the next life than on what it means to live with faith in this world.

⁸⁷ Foucault., *Hermeneutics*, 442.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 429.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 469-73, 477-80.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 265.

spirituality also has to struggle. He has to be ready for a struggle in which his adversary is anything coming to him from the external world: the event. The ancient athlete is an athlete of the event.”⁹¹ The practice involves hearing, understanding, learning, repeating, and memorizing a series of discourses (*logoi*). These discourses are ideas, truths, phrases, behavioral guides, and principles. “Discourses should be understood as statements with a material existence” that become a “permanent virtual and effective presence, which enables immediate recourse to them when necessary.”⁹² Through learning, understanding, and memorizing these principles they become incorporated into the self. They are not true because they are known, but become true when they infuse and motivate bodies, thoughts, practices, and modes of living. “All the verbal repetitions must be part of the preparation so that the saying can be integrated into the individual and control his action, becoming part, as it were, of his muscles and nerves...when the event occurs, the *logos* at that point must have become itself the subject of action, the subject of action must himself have become at that point *logos* and, without having to sing the phrase anew, without even having to utter it, acts as he ought to act.”⁹³ The learned and practiced discourses are not the self, but are always virtually present, ready to guide the action of the subject at crucial moments. They are preparations made for an unexpected event, with a material existence that extends into behavior. In this practice, bodily responsiveness manifests a particular attitude towards encountering the event.

The second characteristic of caring for oneself is that it can transform the self. This key aspect of spiritual truth is a continuation of the task of becoming other that Foucault develops in “A Preface to Transgression” and *The Order of Things*. Folding the concept of

⁹¹ Ibid., 322.

⁹² Ibid., 322-4.

⁹³ Ibid., 326.

caring for oneself into becoming other gives it a new articulation. In spiritual truth, “for the subject to have right of access to the truth he must be changed, transformed, shifted, and become, to some extent and up to a certain point, other than himself. The truth is only given to the subject at a price that brings the subject's being into play. For as he is, the subject is not capable of truth.”⁹⁴ It is not a matter of adding some principles of behavior, but of reshaping the subject who acts. Thus care of the self is difficult and discomfoting: it entails the removal of characteristics and modes of action that define who one is. Even if the intended result is a serene state, when the subject brings their being into play, they pay a price to become something else. Taking the risk entailed by time, one cannot simply abandon the new self and return to a previous state.

The transformation produced by the exercises (*askēsis*) involved in equipping (*paraskue*) oneself enables the subject to achieve the truth. This is because the reasoned principles of truth are also transformed into the actions undertaken by the subject.

The *paraskue* is, again, the element of transformation of *logos* into *ethos*. And the *askēsis* may then be defined as the set, the regular, calculated succession of procedures that are able to form, definitively fix, periodically reactivate and, if necessary, reinforce this *paraskue* for an individual. The *askēsis* is what enables truth-telling—truth-telling addressed to the subject and also truth-telling that the subject addresses to himself—to be constituted as the subject's way of being. The *askēsis* makes truth-telling a mode of being of the subject.⁹⁵

Caring for oneself transforms truths justified by reason into an ethos. Thus the principles become ingrained in character through a spiritual transformation. A new mode of being is produced in which truth-telling is not a matter of conveying knowledge, but of expressing a conviction and a set of actions. Truth is not final, but that which is true for a particular self at a given time, open to yet other transformations and truths through further practice and experimentation

⁹⁴ Ibid., 15.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 327.

The third characteristic of care of the self is the way it connects the subject to the world. Foucault refers to a changed relation to the world throughout the lectures, but he devotes one in particular to a reading of Seneca, who teaches about nature and the world in order to better understand the self. This understanding is described as a movement which on one hand moves to a deeper perspective on things by looking at their interconnection and particularity, and on the other lifts us to a higher perspective on the larger world where each thing has its place. “It involves a sort of stepping back from the point we occupy. This liberation enables us to reach the highest regions of the world without, as it were, ever losing ourselves from sight and without the world to which we belong ever being out of our sight.”⁹⁶ Liberated from a narrow focus on the self, a sense of belonging to the larger world emerges. “Wealth, pleasure, glory: all these transitory events will take on their real proportions...Reaching this point enables us to dismiss and exclude all the false values and all the false dealings in which we are caught up, to gauge what we really are on the earth, and to take the measure of our existence—of this existence that is just a point in space and time—and of our smallness.”⁹⁷ A worldly measure reconfigures attachments to better understand the value of the self and its engagements. Those events and objects which receive their value as means for elevating the self become deceptions. This technique of “punctualizing”⁹⁸ locates the self in its interconnections to question the way self-sufficient and self-oriented reason prioritizes a certain way of living.

Having dislodged the false image of a rational actor, this exercise can then install a new rationality of limited yet interconnected worldliness into the subject. “So the first effect of this knowledge of nature is to establish the maximum tension between the self as reason

⁹⁶ Ibid., 276.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 277.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 278.

and the self as point. Second, the knowledge of nature is liberating inasmuch as it allows us...[to] better and continuously take a certain view of ourselves, to ensure a *contemplatio sui* in which the object of contemplation is ourselves in the world, ourselves inasmuch as our existence is linked to a set of determinations and necessities whose rationality we understand.”⁹⁹ As with limit-experiences, Foucault seeks “maximum tension” which pushes the subject to become otherwise. In this instance, it is the tension between understanding the connections and determinations in the world and the experience of being subject to them. This tension is liberating because it shifts our position from one of feeling subject to these external forces to understanding them to some degree and even participating in them. It is not a matter of abandoning reason, but of understanding the shifts and nudges through which the world influences the subject, and the subject it.

The uncertain, dynamic, and interconnected view of the world that emerges from this requires and supports an affirmative existential disposition.

All the wonders to be found in heaven, in the stars and meteors, in the beauty of the earth, in the plains, in the sea and the mountains, are all inextricably bound up with the thousand plagues of the body and soul, with wars, robbery, death, and suffering...[One] is shown the world precisely so that he clearly understands that there is no choice, that nothing can be chosen without choosing the rest, that there is only one possible world, and that we are bound to this world...The only thing, and the only point of choice is this...Consider whether you want to enter or leave, that is to say, whether or not you want to live.¹⁰⁰

Seneca, from whom Foucault takes this passage, and Foucault himself both reply in the affirmative. It is notable that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche also emphasized an affirmation of belonging to this unruly world with its events, joys, and uncertainty. Schmitt is the only thinker examined in this study who perhaps was not able to affirm such a world. Though he enjoyed many aspects of existence, and did not shy away from acknowledging its problematic parts, he likely saw the world as too precarious to feel comfortable in it. Thus

⁹⁹ Ibid., 279.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 284-5.

his thought was driven away from the riskier aspects of life and toward false promises of security and consolation. An affirmative ethos of the event involves an existential commitment to belonging to this world in its entirety.

The fourth characteristic is that care of the self is a way of living. Practices and principles reach into the regularized habits and expectations of daily life.

The care of the self not only completely penetrates, commands, and supports the art of living...The *tekhnē tou biou*, the way of dealing with the events of life, must be inserted within a care of the self that has now become general and absolute....One lives with the relationship to one's self as the fundamental project of existence, the ontological support which must justify, found, and command all the techniques of existence.¹⁰¹

Daily living becomes a project. Diet, occupation, media choices, aspirations, travel, the orientation to death, dwelling, interpersonal relations, etc. all become important in caring for oneself. Affirming a world to which reason is insufficient entails a supplementary set of practices and principles that become an existential foundation. Preparing for and responding to events requires attending to and trying to shape the motions of life.

This establishment of care of the self as a way of living in an unruly world expresses the truth obtained through spiritual transformation. Foucault argues that for the ancients it was a matter of “knowing the extent to which the fact of knowing the truth, of speaking the truth, and of practicing and exercising the truth enables the subject not only to act as he ought, but also to be as he ought to be and wishes to be.”¹⁰² The result of caring for oneself is that one experiences and lives the truth that they know. Foucault uses *parrhēsia* to elucidate this. *Parrhēsia* is a form of particularly free and open speech that is characterized primarily by a realization of spiritual truth. “What must be shown is not just that this is right, the truth, but also that I who am speaking am the person who judges these thoughts to be really true and I am also the person for whom they are true...What characterizes *parrhēsia*, *libertas*, is this

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 448.

¹⁰² Ibid., 318.

perfect fit between the subject who speaks, or the subject of enunciation, and the subject of conduct.”¹⁰³ A conduct or mode of being becomes a living truth because it has been developed and incorporated by a subject who speaks on the truth of it. That person vouches for those truths with their existence since it really is the life that they are living. Contrarily, when one's actions and their claims about truth do not line up, it is clear that one is not caring for oneself. Such a test serves a clear and critical function with regard to those who say they believe in climate destabilization but do not live accordingly.

Finally, care of the self is political. Foucault discusses the political implications of caring for oneself in the ancient world a number of times, but he also argues that it is an essential political task today. “I think we may have to suspect that we find it impossible today to constitute an ethic of the self, even though it may be an urgent, fundamental, and politically indispensable task, if it is true after all that there is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself.”¹⁰⁴ Foucault suggests that the various versions of contemporary self development—being oneself, freeing oneself, etc.—are all blocked and ossified efforts. This is in part due to the forms of governmentality under which we exist. Indeed, it seems that there could be some fruitful connections between Foucault’s development of care of the self and his critique of the way neoliberalism pushes people to make themselves into entrepreneurs of the self.¹⁰⁵ But for Foucault, governmentality always has to pass through the relation one has with oneself. This is why Foucault thinks the self is one important node of political intervention. If caring for oneself is “urgent, fundamental, and politically indispensable,” it is because the contemporary political milieu deploys individual development and success as a way to

¹⁰³ Ibid., 405-6.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 252.

¹⁰⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

further systematic inequality and exclusion, and we have no counter-notions of the self with which to resist it.

Amidst the network of cultural and social imperatives and incentives to be individually economically successful, to consume any of a myriad of goods and lifestyles, to draw sharp lines between us and those who threaten our safety and well-being, to promote certain forms of strength and power, to adhere to a calculable short-range view of time, and so on, the relationship that one has to oneself can provide a checkpoint for these comforts, values, and impulses. Caring for oneself, insofar as it brings the spiritual dimension into play, insofar as it involves risking one's mode of being, is already a political mode of engagement.

Why risk yourself when so many comforts and goods are available? As Foucault indicates, contemporary modes of living militate against spiritual truths, against considering and recognizing events that interrupt and upset our modes of being, and against occupying oneself with techniques and exercises. But we cannot simply take up the same techniques that the ancients used. Rather, Foucault wants to bring the ancient world to us as an interruptive event that may spur us to develop ways to care for ourselves in our own time and condition. A couple of contemporary examples of caring for oneself can be illustrative.

In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault argues that the formation of revolutionary subjectivity is a matter of care of the self.¹⁰⁶ In “Useless to Revolt?” he reflects on the Iranian Revolution as an event and on revolution more generally.

The impulse by which a single individual, a group, a minority or an entire people says, 'I will no longer obey,' and throws the risk of their life in the face of an authority they consider unjust seems to me to be something irreducible. Because no authority is capable of making it utterly impossible: Warsaw will always have its ghetto in revolt and its sewers crowded with rebels. And because the man who rebels is finally inexplicable; it takes a wrenching-away that interrupts the flow of history, and its long chains of reasons, for a man to be able, 'really,' to prefer the risk of death to the certainty of having to obey.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 207-9.

¹⁰⁷ Michel Foucault, “Useless to Revolt?” *Power*, ed. James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New

Revolting breaks free of history's reasons and is inexplicable because its truth is spiritual rather than based on knowledge. Indeed, Foucault points out that a certain "spirituality" distinct from religion was an important part of the Iranian Revolution.¹⁰⁸ Principles and a configuration of the self must be produced that enable one to risk one's life: a particular orientation toward the event of death and the event of revolution, and an ethos that embodies political freedom against repression. A revolutionary care of self may be somewhat trans-historical, but Foucault also notes that in his cultural milieu, a particular ethos is necessary to even be able to observe revolutions and give them their place, to understand the events taking place.¹⁰⁹

A second example is the French journalist Jean Daniel. Foucault suggests a risky event-orientation in the title of his tribute to him: "For an Ethic of Discomfort." This piece is in part a review of Daniel's *The Age of Ruptures*, in part an examination of Daniel's ethos, and in part a discussion of contemporary politics in France. Foucault places Daniel in the tradition of the event set off by Kant's "What is Enlightenment?," from which the question of who and what we are emerges. But it is not great events and ruptures that Daniel is attuned to, but rather "imperceptible moments of modification: shifts, slides, cracks, moving viewpoints, increasing and decreasing distances, roads that stretch out, bend sharply, and suddenly turn back."¹¹⁰ Attending to these events allowed Daniel to show how the contemporary French political landscape, particularly on the left, became what it was.

In light of the failure of established ideologies such as communism, the left became united through an unspoken and poorly understood politico-existential task: "those who

Press, 2000), 449.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 451.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 452-3.

¹¹⁰ Michel Foucault, "For an Ethic of Discomfort," *Power*, ed. James Faubion. trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 2000), 444.

understood the need to tear themselves free from conservatism, if only in order to *exist*.”¹¹¹ Daniel perceived this transformation because he had his “own way of changing, or, what amounts to the same thing, of perceiving that everything changes.”¹¹² This formulation recalls the interconnection of different temporalities in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Foucault frames this ethic of discomfort through Merleau-Ponty. “Never to consent to being completely comfortable with one's own presuppositions. Never to let them fall peacefully asleep, but also never to believe that a new fact will suffice to overturn them; never to imagine that one can change them like arbitrary axioms, remembering that in order to give them the necessary mobility one must have a distant view, but also look at what is nearby and all around oneself.”¹¹³ Foucault sees in Daniel a self-practice that critically engaged his presuppositions as he observed and tried to make sense of the world. This ethos not only allowed Daniel to transfigure himself, but also to be more alert to those small events which indicated larger social and political transformations. Through this he was able to effectively engage the world in which he lived, giving elucidating suggestions to answer the question of what we are and how the French left constituted its collective existence.

In resonance but not direct connection with Foucault, Paul Kingsnorth is developing an ethos that carries us beyond cultural internalism to help us respond to climate change. After 20 years of environmental activism, he withdrew to try to articulate the environmental crisis we face. With Dougauld Hine, Kingsnorth laid the groundwork for this attempt in “Uncivilization: The Dark Mountain Manifesto.” This document founded the Dark

¹¹¹ Ibid., 447.

¹¹² Ibid., 444.

¹¹³ Ibid., 448.

Mountain Project as a way to sound out the climate event and try to produce a timely response to it and environmental destruction more generally.

The Dark Mountain project is about being able to tell the truth. It begins with the attempt to get away from self-betrayal. “I do feel the need to be honest with myself, which is where the ‘walking away’ comes in. I am trying to walk away from dishonesty, my own included.”¹¹⁴ Walking away makes it possible to audit our situation and find a way to articulate what is happening. “And so we find ourselves, all of us together, poised trembling on the edge of a change so massive that we have no way of gauging it. None of us knows where to look, but all of us know not to look down...We believe it is time to look down.”¹¹⁵ Among those who refuse to look down, are politicians, business people, those who continue shopping, those who simply despair, and the environmentalists who “work frantically to try and fend off the coming storm.”¹¹⁶ Looking down is not about facing the hard facts and stating them. Rather, the main project is to tell stories in light of a failure of narrative to make sense of our situation. “We want to be able to take a cold, hard look at the human predicament, without necessarily being obliged to have a ‘solution’ to offer. We are not pre-judging anything, nor offering trite ‘answers’...what writers ought to be able to do is to examine this process, and our place in it, and to do so from beyond the framework of our current cultural assumptions.”¹¹⁷ Just as Foucault suggests the need to create subjects capable of telling the truth, Kingsnorth is relocating himself to be able to tell a story that embraces and confronts our contemporary predicament.

¹¹⁴ Wen Stephenson, “I withdraw” A talk with climate defeatist Paul Kingsnorth,” April 11, 2012, accessed July 18, 2014, <http://grist.org/climate-energy/i-withdraw-a-talk-with-climate-defeatist-paul-kingsnorth/>.

¹¹⁵ Paul Kingsnorth and Dougauld Hine, “Uncivilization: The Dark Mountain Manifesto,” accessed July 18, 2014, <http://dark-mountain.net/about/manifesto/>.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Paul Kingsnorth, “Journey to the Dark Mountain,” accessed July 18, 2014, <http://www.paulkingsnorth.net/journalism/journey-to-the-dark-mountain/>.

As a crucial part of the project, Kingsnorth and Hine attempt to “stand outside the human” with what they call “uncivilised art.” “It sets out to paint a picture of homo sapiens which...[another] being from our own [world]...might recognise as something approaching a truth.”¹¹⁸ They seek to produce art, and writing in particular, that turns away from the myths and stories that have propelled humanity for the last few centuries to locate the place of the human within nature. Yet this truth can only be stated through “the shifting of emphasis from man to notman.”¹¹⁹ Such writing and art tries to express a knowledge outside of the anthropological sleep in which Foucault thinks we are trapped.

This position is underscored in a comment that Kingsnorth made in response to Wen Stephenson, who argued that a better course of action would be that of Tim DeChristopher who is in prison for committing fraud to outbid oil companies for federal land use rights. DeChristopher justified his actions by saying “I would never go to jail to protect animals or plants or wilderness. For me, it’s about the people.”¹²⁰ Wen sees this as “a humanitarian imperative [that] transcends environmentalism and environmental politics.”¹²¹ Kingsnorth's response contests this imperative. “The Tim DeChristopher quote which you use approvingly is something which divides us...I’m of the opinion that the last thing the world needs right now is more “humanitarians.” What the world needs right now is human beings who are able to see outside the human bubble, and understand that all this talk about collapse, decline, and crisis is not just a human concern.”¹²² Kingsnorth is trying to undercut the assumptions that privilege the human. This is part of what makes his politics so frightening and offensive to people: he refuses to recognize the right of humans to live

¹¹⁸ Kingsnorth and Hine, “Uncivilization.”

¹¹⁹ Ibid, citing Robinson Jeffers.

¹²⁰ Stephenson, “I withdraw.”

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

before other species, or the environmental crisis as a problem that primarily affects humans. He refuses to give us a privileged place so that he can find out what place in nature we really occupy.

Following in the tradition of caring for oneself, Kingsnorth adopts a few experimental exercises to help him carry out this task. One is to

take part in a very ancient practical and spiritual tradition: withdrawing from the fray...Withdraw so that you can allow yourself to sit back quietly and feel, intuit, work out what is right for you and what nature might need from you. Withdraw because refusing to help the machine advance—refusing to tighten the ratchet further—is a deeply moral position. Withdraw because action is not always more effective than inaction. Withdraw to examine your worldview: the cosmology, the paradigm, the assumptions, the direction of travel. All real change starts with withdrawal.¹²³

When he withdrew, he was heavily criticized as a nihilist, a defeatist, a romantic, and a number of other things. But Kingsnorth frames withdrawing as an alternative form of action. It is a refusal to participate in a destructive culture. Being in the impossible position of wanting to avert climate change and yet still embodying climate change by being alive pushed Kingsnorth to a different position. He had to withdraw and accept climate change. This enabled him to reflect on his own position in relation to nature and nature's relation to him. Finally, it is about clearing some space from which further change can come.

Another exercise that Kingsnorth practices and teaches is scything. This activity produces a different mindset and opens a different level of connection with nature.

Using a scythe properly is a meditation: your body in tune with the tool, your tool in tune with the land. You concentrate without thinking, you follow the lay of the ground with the face of your blade, you are aware of the keenness of its edge, you can hear the birds, see things moving through the grass ahead of you. Everything is connected to everything else, and if it isn't, it doesn't work. Your blade tip jams into the ground, you blunt the edge on a molehill you didn't notice, you pull a muscle in your back, you slice your finger as you're honing. Focus—relaxed focus—is the key to mowing well.¹²⁴

When writing about this exercise, Kingsnorth intersperses it with reflections on the writings of Ted Kaczynski, who he both admires and resists. But this extends to further reflections

¹²³ Paul Kingsnorth, "Dark Ecology," *Orion Magazine*, Jan/Feb 2013, accessed July 18, 2014, <http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/7277>.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

on the failure of the environmental movement, its resonance with neoliberalism, technology fetishism, convivial modes of living, time, progress, and a possible course of action. He ties all of these to the activity of scything. Much like some of the exercises that Foucault cites, this is on one hand a repetitious training of the body and mind, and on the other hand a way of producing new thinking that alters behavior.

These exercises are part of a spiritual transformation. Kingsnorth resists organized religion and new-age notions of the sacred, yet he feels compelled to adopt spiritual language and thinking. If “[t]he Dark Mountain Project arose out of a collapse in belief,”¹²⁵ then what Kingsnorth noticed afterward was the importance of spiritual experiences in nature. For him, spending time in the wilderness is a key aspect of undergoing spiritual transformations through which humans come to understand their place in and connection to the rest of the world. Thus Kingsnorth calls for those who feel that nature is sacred to try to speak truthfully about it.

I know there are others who feel like this, and I know there are others who don't. It is not a position to be argued from...I do, and I can't argue it away. There it is. But here's my suggestion: this feeling is not an awkward and embarrassing stumbling block in the way of a rational assessment of the reality of ecosystems...And those of us who do feel it...have a duty to talk about it, openly, calmly, incisively...we should at least try and find the words for what is so plainly missing. This is not an indulgence, but a necessity.¹²⁶

Kingsnorth acknowledges the failure of reason to speak to this connectivity, but does not say that spiritual commitment to nature forms an unbridgeable gulf across which one cannot communicate. Even though the cultural milieu is dismissive towards such perspectives and they have remained undeveloped, it is necessary to find a new way to express them.

Kingsnorth's approach molds practices and the transformations they produce into a way of life. He conceives of climate change as an existential problem. “We are all climate

¹²⁵ Kingsnorth, “Journey to the Dark Mountain.”

¹²⁶ Paul Kingsnorth, “In The Black Chamber,” accessed July 18, 2014, <http://paulkingsnorth.net/journalism/in-the-black-chamber/>.

change. It is not the evil “1%” destroying the planet. We are all of us part of that destruction. This is the great, conflicted, complex situation we find ourselves in. I am climate change. You are climate change. Our culture is climate change. And climate change itself is just the tip of a much bigger iceberg...”¹²⁷ Indeed, for him this denial “extends to every aspect of what we produce and how we live our lives.”¹²⁸ Taking seriously the problem that everyone, particularly in the West, drives climate change and environmental destruction through their life activities means that an entire different way of living has to be produced. The problem is an existential failure “to distinguish between life and lifestyle.”¹²⁹ In their writing and art, the Dark Mountain Project seeks to bring out this distinction and to give new meaning to contemporary existence. They hope to “redraw the maps...by which we navigate all areas of life...Our maps must be the kind sketched in the dust with a stick, washed away by the next rain.”¹³⁰ If the existing stories only propel us along a fateful and false course, then new ones are needed which reshape life. Such stories are not limited to specific political and scientific solutions or a set course of action, but should inspire developments and experiments that try to connect humans to nature. Like Foucault's notion of a subject that periodically undergoes change, these maps are temporary and should install new behaviors while also allowing for future changes as well.

Finally, though it has already been implied, it is worth stating directly that this project entails a new connection to the world. Kingsnorth wants to accept and love the world, with all the good and bad that it entails. Setting out on this path means accepting and affirming the worst possible outcomes of climate change, even as one might fear them and want to work to prevent them. For him, nature is harsh and bountiful, it connects to our lives

¹²⁷ Stephenson, “I withdraw.”

¹²⁸ Kingsnorth, “Journey to the Dark Mountain.”

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Kingsnorth and Hine, “Uncivilization: The Dark Mountain Manifesto.”

practically, culturally, spiritually, scientifically, and existentially. “The Uncivilised writer knows the world is...something we are enmeshed in—a patchwork and a framework of places, experiences, sights, smells, sounds.” The task for Kingsnorth and others like him is to make that world tangible and thinkable, to find ways to connect themselves and to reach out to help others connect themselves as well. Even if we live amidst these sounds and smells, we do not experience them and give them weight and meaning. Reforging this connection means giving locality contour, depth, and meaning, and forging a vital and spiritual link with nature as it sustains and perhaps destroys us. This is one image of what a Foucauldian politics of caring for oneself might look like today.

These examples show, perhaps, that there are multiple directions open for developing a care of the self today. On one hand, we might start with the broad orientation that Foucault himself uses. “I am fascinated by history and the relationship between personal experience and those events of which we are a part. I think that is the nucleus of my theoretical desires.”¹³¹ From limit-experiences to caring for oneself, we need ways to engage an event. Because their effects can be so dramatic, because they are hard if not impossible to control, and because they can arrive unexpected or go unobserved, events play an uncertain and volatile role. Contemporary responses may need to incorporate a large degree of malleability and dynamism, a desperate experimentalism. When asked if the Greek model of caring for oneself would work today, Foucault replied that it would not, partly because of their treatment of women and slaves and partly because the world-historical context is so different. “My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper-and pessimistic activism. I think that

¹³¹ Michel Foucault, “An Interview by Stephen Riggins,” *Ethics Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 124.

the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger.”¹³² Examining Greek care of the self helps problematize our contemporary condition. It points out some of the dangers we face and the destructive human-centeredness of how we are living. Yet this new alertness is only a starting point for diagnosing our relations and the various dangers we confront today. Eventual responsiveness will require this alertness, combined with a willingness to endure discomfort, sacrifice and transformation, and the existential energy to experiment until we are able to live appropriately in relation to the problems we face.

¹³² Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” *Ethics Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 256.

Chapter Five

An Ethos for the Climate Event

In his 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore focuses on the scientific and political aspects of climate change. In 2008, he updated and shortened the slideshow that was the centerpiece of that documentary. Significantly, he gave it a new frame to orient climate change responsiveness.

I was reminded by Karen Armstrong's fantastic presentation that religion really properly understood is not about belief, but about behavior. Perhaps we should say the same thing about optimism. How dare we be optimistic? Optimism is sometimes characterized as a belief, an intellectual posture. As Mahatma Gandhi famously said, "You must become the change you wish to see in the world." And the outcome about which we wish to be optimistic is not going to be created by the belief alone, except to the extent that the belief brings about new behavior. But the word "behavior" is also, I think, sometimes misunderstood in this context. I'm a big advocate of changing the light bulbs and buying hybrids, and Tipper and I put 33 solar panels on our house, and dug the geothermal wells, and did all of that other stuff. But, as important as it is to change the light bulbs, it is more important to change the laws. And when we change our behavior in our daily lives, we sometimes leave out the citizenship part and the democracy part. In order to be optimistic about this, we have to become incredibly active as citizens in our democracy. In order to solve the climate crisis, we have to solve the democracy crisis. And we have one.¹

Gore frames science and politics within a specific notion of belief in which facts and political obstacles do not encompass climate change problem. Despite the success of Gore's first documentary and the tireless efforts of many others engaged in the issue, little change occurred. People, including scientists, do not carry out their everyday lives or even vote on the basis of what is true. Moving beyond consumption habits, Gore argues for developing an intellectual posture that links catastrophic events—one in democracy and one in the climate—in a combined response. It is thus an existential transformation that feeds into multiple problems, affecting the larger political, cultural, and natural environment. It seems that Gore is trying to articulate the need for a particular ethos to respond to climate change.²

¹ Al Gore, "New Thinking on the Climate Crisis" *TED Talks* video, 0:31, April 2008, http://www.ted.com/talks/al_gore_s_new_thinking_on_the_climate_crisis.html.

² Gore's own behavior with regard to climate change is problematic. His actions as vice president were

This chapter draws on the philosophies presented in the last four chapters, auditing and reworking contemporary climate change literature to suggest what such an ethos might look like. After exploring the potential and limits of a scientific account, I will consider political-theological approaches to climate change. Such a view considers both how sovereign political power responds to climate change and what it would mean to believe in climate change. Alternatively, an ethical-cultural take identifies problematic cultural drives that push us closer to a climate crisis and proposes ways to transform those drives into more responsible modes of living. Finally, I will look at a tragic reading of climate change that enables us to love and participate in an unruly world that is sometimes hostile to human existence. Though none of the thinkers examined in this study can provide a formula for responding to the climate event, collectively they intensify parts of our knowledge and experience to produce the interruptions that may help us acclimatize ourselves to this event.

The Limits of Science: Complexity, Uncertainty, Caution

In *With Speed and Violence*, Fred Pearce discusses the history and science of a particularly troubling aspect of climate change: tipping points. Tipping points are lines which, once crossed, set processes in motion which are very difficult to reverse. Global warming is not a linear movement, but contains triggers and switches that can alter the state and functioning of the global climate system. These triggers are often hidden: climate history shows that they exist, but it is hard to say where they lie and how they work.

Since climate change is not linear, some of the effects are not slow and steady, but rapid and severe. This difficult fact orients Pearce's approach to climate change: "The central message of this book is that while skeptics about climate change have a valid point when

counterproductive and his recent climate crusade is predicated on extensive air travel. Even that advocacy, however, is informed by a relatively reductionist scientific vision of the problem.

they say that scientists' climate predictions are far less certain than is often claimed, those skeptics are dreadfully wrong to take comfort in this. I take no comfort at all. There is chaos out there, and we should be afraid.”³ It is certain that Earth's climate system has undergone rapid changes with enormous and sometimes devastating effects well before the age of the Anthropocene when human effects on climate became prominent. However, when it comes to the state of the climate system today and the effect of human behavior on it, we are confronted with uncertainty. Pearce points out that for some, that uncertainty itself is a solution to the problem: there is no climate problem until we know exactly what it is. For Pearce, however, uncertainty intensifies the problem, accentuating the ways in which human life exists in connection, tension, and fragility with the larger world.

Pearce is cautious and fearful, yet intellectually committed to the world in a double sense. “Nature is fragile, environmentalists often tell us. But the lesson of this book is that it is not so. The truth is far more worrying. Nature is strong and packs a serious counterpunch. Its revenge for man-made global warming will very probably unleash unstoppable planetary forces. And they will not be gradual. The history of our planet's climate shows that it does not do gradual change.”⁴ First, he suggests an image of nature that is powerful and does not rely on the existence of humans. Even if human life were to end, nature could continue forward untroubled. Second, though he realizes what nature is, he favors a world with the continued participation of human life. This is why he is concerned with how humans are altering the world in such a way that makes their survival increasingly difficult.

Pearce looks at historical, contemporary, and potential future climate events to situate humans in the world. One significant historical event is the onset of the last ice age

³ Fred Pearce, *With Speed and Violence: Why Scientists Fear Tipping Points in climate Change* (Boston: Beacon, 2007), xix.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xxviii.

12,800 years ago, which was triggered by a large glacial lake in North America emptying into the Atlantic Ocean. It may be that this onslaught interrupted the regularity of the ocean conveyor system which circulates water throughout the world. That, in turn, disrupted the existing climate. “Within about a generation, temperatures fell worldwide—perhaps by as little as 3 to 5°F in the tropics, but by an average of as much as 28 degrees farther north, and...by 54 degrees in winter at Scoresby Sound, in eastern Greenland.”⁵ After 1300 years, the freeze ended “and temperatures returned to their former levels even faster than they had fallen...’Most of that change looks like it happened in a single year. It could have been less, perhaps even a single season...!’”⁶ Pearce points to many such historical climate events. Though not all of them happen so rapidly, many happen rapidly enough to indicate that dramatic climate change with serious impacts has been a periodic part of earth's functioning. There is no reason to believe that anthropogenic climate change is exempt.

Though the hurricanes, droughts, and fires that we experience today are small compared to global climate events, Pearce engages several of them to depict their scale, impact, and their link to climate change. He points to the weather in 1998, which, up to that point, was the hottest year of the 20th century. It was also the year when hurricane Mitch, the strongest hurricane in the Americas in the previous 200 years, devastated Honduras leaving 10,000 dead and 2 million homeless as well as generating immense agricultural and structural damage. “That year, besides the storms, the rainforests got no rain, forest fires of unprecedented ferocity ripped through the tinder-dry jungles of Borneo and Brazil, Peru and Tanzania, Florida and Sardinia. New Guinea had the worst drought in a century; thousands starved to death. East Africa saw the worst floods in half a century—during the dry

⁵ Ibid., 148-54.

⁶ Ibid., 150.

season.”⁷ The list goes on to cover more rare and unseasonable disasters across the world. Pearce also points to the 2003 heat wave in Europe which killed 35,000 people.⁸ This was the first weather event that climate scientists attributed directly to man-made climate change, though many also connect the weather in 1998 and Katrina in 2005 to climate change. Indeed, it seems that every year contains new and severe weather events. Though it is hard to say how much of that effect is directly caused by human behavior, what Pearce wants to point out is that as devastating as these events are, they are still minor in comparison to those that have occurred throughout Earth's history. “The question is not: Can we prove that events like Mitch are caused by climate change? It is: Can we afford to take the chance that they are?”⁹ Pearce encourages proceeding with caution in the face of danger and uncertainty.

Pearce also looks at climate models to suggest probable climate events if emissions are not dramatically reduced. For one thing, the Greenland ice sheet, which was once thought to be incredibly stable, turns out to be subject to a number of feedbacks that produce rapid and dramatic change. The collapse of the Greenland ice sheet, a process that was thought to take centuries, is now “very likely” and could happen within a few decades raising sea levels 23 feet and potentially setting off other irreversible climate feedbacks.¹⁰ Alternatively, there are a number of different aspects of climate change which could interfere with the Asian monsoon. Over three billion people rely on the monsoon rains for food and when it has faltered for even one year in the past, it has resulted in the death of tens of millions.¹¹ Any of the potential threats to the monsoon from climate change would likely

⁷ Ibid., 18-19.

⁸ Ibid., 201-3.

⁹ Ibid., 19.

¹⁰ Ibid., xix-xxi, 39-45.

¹¹ Ibid., 194-7.

cause it to be regularly or permanently disrupted, resulting in widespread suffering and starvation throughout Asia. Events such as these, immense sea level rise, extreme temperature increases, mega droughts, super hurricanes, and other climate disasters may be in store. The point is not to produce an apocalyptic mentality, but rather to use past and current events to orient us towards potential futures and thereby influence our actions today.

There are a number of mechanisms that drive these rapid and uncertain events. The scientists that Pearce discusses use the language of feedbacks, thresholds, amplifiers, chaos theory, fractals, phase space, complexity theory, and bifurcations to explain climate change. What unites these terms is the vision of climate that they describe. Climate change cannot be seen simply as increasing temperatures resulting from increased carbon emissions. The climate is actually a system composed of a number of interconnected elements such as stratospheric winds, the ocean conveyor, El Niño, the biological pump, solar pulses, the hydrological cycle, and the Earth's wobble. A change in one element may set off changes and feedbacks in others. For example, in the ice-albedo feedback, the problem is not just that ice is melting, but that as it melts it turns from a reflective to a darker surface, absorbing more of the sun's heat. "You cannot at the end of the day change one bit without changing the other. They are all part of the same pattern...! Each functions as an integrated system, not as a series of discrete levers."¹² This complex interaction constitutes a large part of what makes climate change uncertain.

Things will only become more uncertain as we learn more and new situations emerge. "Right now the only such prognosis is uncertainty. The Earth system seems chaotic, with the potential to head off in many different directions. If there is order, we don't yet know where it lies...the story of abrupt climate change will become more complicated before

¹² Ibid., 228.

it is finished.”¹³ This uncertainty is magnified by the fact that our situation is “genuinely new.”¹⁴ Scientists have been able to trace patterns for many of the elements that constitute Earth's climate system. But human aerosol production, deforestation, and carbon emissions are new elements for which there is no record. This magnifies the intensity of the uncertainty. While the climate has many directions in which to go, humans do not. The question is what can be done so that the climate will take a direction that remains hospitable to human life.

Though Pearce's approach to climate is complex, his approach to the human response is traditional and straightforward: politics and economics will alter human behavior to some extent while technological innovation will do the most work to mediate climate change.¹⁵ These are fair, productive, and likely necessary solutions. What Pearce does not confront is why, if they are so straightforward, these changes are not already being made. On the whole he does not offer a strategy for how to deal with those who do not believe in climate change. Rather, he tends to treat it simply as a set of facts that rational people need to accept and then behave accordingly. For him, even if the skeptics are right about many of their particular points, none of that does anything to undermine the main points that earth's climate is sensitive and jumpy, that humans are having a warming effect on the planet, and that we are uncertain about the effects of this. In this way, Pearce's portrayal of past, present, and possible future climate events may help draw people to his message of caution, even if they don't engage the science involved. This, however, may not be enough. It may be necessary to find more compelling ways to engage people and orient them towards a broader responsiveness to this new world condition. This need is underscored by the “Abrupt

¹³ Ibid., 237-8.

¹⁴ Ibid., 239.

¹⁵ Ibid., 241-52.

Impacts of Climate Change: Anticipating Surprises” report issued by the National Research Council in December, 2013. Even scientists in official advising capacities, who have often avoided pointing out catastrophic impacts of climate change, now feel compelled to raise this issue.

Political Theologies of Climate Change

It is not enough to know the facts about climate change. It is too easy for that knowledge to remain abstract, to simply serve as a matter for discussion, or to remain isolated and unconnected to the movements of daily life. The problem of those on the right who deny that climate change exists is well known. What is given less attention is the fact that most of those who know that it is occurring live in much the same way as those who deny that it exists. A scientific understanding falls short in motivating changes in the way people live. At the same time, a number of theological approaches have been put forward, which contain both problems and promise. I will begin by looking at existing theological responses that obfuscate and avoid the problem of climate change. Then I will turn to Carl Schmitt's political theology to help elucidate other responses. Finally, I will argue that Kierkegaard suggests a more productive political-theological response to climate change.

Broadly speaking, there are three dimensions to the dominant theological response to climate change. First, there is a position that downplays scientific arguments about climate change and evolution with biblical ones. This is tied to studies funded by the fossil fuel industry that attempt to discredit climate change.¹⁶ The result is a cultural assemblage that fosters doubt and confusion. Even though there is no major disagreement in peer-reviewed scientific literature about the basic facts of climate change, the campaign to reposition it as

¹⁶ See George Monbiot, *Heat* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2009), Chapter 2, and Clive Hamilton, *Requiem for a Species* (New York: Earthscan, 2010), Chapter 1.

theory rather than fact has led over 50% of articles in major newspapers to express doubt as to the cause of global warming.¹⁷ This obscures the issue by arguing that we need to wait to see what will happen, if anything at all. Kierkegaard was sensitive to this problem and points to a number of countermeasures active in his society that presumptively resist such events:

When in our age we hear these words: It will be judged by the result—then we know at once with whom we have the honor of speaking. Those who talk this way are a numerous type whom I shall designate under the common name of assistant professors. With security in life, they live in their thoughts: they have a *permanent* position and a *secure* future in a well-organized state. They have hundreds, yes, even thousands of years between them and the earthquakes of existence; they are not afraid that such things can be repeated, for then what would the police and the newspapers say?¹⁸

The combination of a comfortable state, a secure job, the order of a police force, and the regularized information of the media militate against the idea that something might occur which would disrupt this regime, calling into question its interpretation of the world and the expected trajectory of its future. Kierkegaard pushes us to see not only what events might be unsettling our lives, but also toward resisting those interpretations that assume the security of the present state of being.

Second, political leaders who publicly profess certain theological visions use political power to pursue those visions in ways hostile to established and scientifically supported public programs, empowering those sharing similar theological views to do the same. Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush “placed fundamentalists in positions of authority throughout the federal government...and these appointees were not shy about amending scientific reports in ways more agreeable to administration doctrine. Many professional environmental scientists and highly competent career civil servants were fired or forced into early

¹⁷ Al Gore, *An Inconvenient Truth* (New York: Rodale, 2006), 260-67.

¹⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 62-3.

retirement, replaced by others with apocalyptic religious views and considerable hostility to laws and regulations aimed to protect the environment.”¹⁹

A third theological response is a fundamentalist Christian vision of the end times. According to this interpretation, heaven is the true reality and earth is just a battleground in which the forces of good are pitted against sin and human evil. The only solution to this situation is Christ's second coming and redemption. Yet this redemption is tied to Armageddon on earth. According to this theological response, intensified and more frequent climate events are signs that the end times are coming. Thus fundamentalists feel no motivation to care for earth, continuing instead to promote and engage in behaviors that drive climate change.²⁰

Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology* can help elucidate some of these theological responses to climate change as well as others that initially may not seem theological. For him, “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts...for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver... [and] the exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology.”²¹ Just as God intervenes in the normal order of the world to produce a miracle, Schmitt argues that particular individuals, usually powerful leaders, suspend the constitution in order to change it or carry out other extralegal measures. Thus “it is precisely the exception that makes relevant the subject of sovereignty...The precise details of an emergency cannot be anticipated, nor can one spell out what may take place in such a case, especially when it is truly a matter of an extreme emergency and of how it is to be eliminated.”²² There is no constitutional or legal

¹⁹ Robert Kennedy, *Crimes Against Nature* (New York, HarberCollins, 2004), cited in David Orr, *Down to the Wire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 131.

²⁰ Orr, *Down to the Wire*, 132-38.

²¹ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 36.

²² *Ibid.*, 6-7.

order which can anticipate and account for every problem that will arise. Sometimes these problems lead to situations where the sovereign intervenes to maintain the existing order or establish a new one.

Drawing on Kierkegaard, Schmitt argues that “[p]recisely a philosophy of concrete life must not withdraw from the exception and the extreme case, but must be interested in it to the highest degree...The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything: It confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception. In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition.”²³ Schmitt links himself to Kierkegaard insofar as they are both interested in paradoxical exceptions that interrupt an established system, upsetting and possibly transforming it. For Kierkegaard the exception exposes the individual to existential anxiety; for Schmitt the threat of violence.

In Schmitt's image of the exception, things become more dangerous and risky since there are no normal legal guarantees. “The exception, which is not codified in the existing legal order, can at best be characterized as a case of extreme peril, a danger to the existence of the state, or the like.”²⁴ It is not just the exception that is dangerous, but the world itself. Schmitt believes that there is no system so secure that it can eliminate the exception, which means that the world remains a perilous place.²⁵ As chapter three demonstrated, one potential response is to assume this personal risk in order to work on behalf of truths, peoples, and just laws that the regime tries to exclude. This might be closer to the discomfort that Kierkegaard urges us to work through. Schmitt's response, however, is to combine

²³ Ibid., 15.

²⁴ Ibid., 6.

²⁵ Ibid., 7.

personal interest, extreme politics, and exclusionary measures to try to suppress the insecurity that the world contains.

Someone familiar with Schmitt's worldview would not be surprised by the way that Reagan and Bush replaced environmental and science administrators with those in line with their own political and theological views. This is an instance where sovereign power sought to ignore and obscure the uncertainty of climate change out of commitment to a neoliberal vision of security and stability. Reading Schmitt also allows us to see how other responses to climate change are tied to this particular expression of theology. First, a June 2013 article in *The Guardian* shows that extra-legal measures are already being deployed in anticipation of emergency situations brought on by climate change:

Since the 2008 economic crash, security agencies have increasingly spied on political activists, especially environmental groups, on behalf of corporate interests. This activity is linked to the last decade of US defence planning, which has been increasingly concerned by the risk of civil unrest at home triggered by catastrophic events linked to climate change, energy shocks or economic crisis - or all three.
Just last month, unilateral changes to US military laws formally granted the Pentagon extraordinary powers to intervene in a domestic "emergency" or "civil disturbance"²⁶

In the United States, those with power refuse to address the global uncertainty of climate change. Rather, they insist on trying to maintain security and comfort for a well-established group of people in one country through whatever emergency measures are necessary. Indeed, the US security apparatus already concluded in a 2007 official report that it is “essential that the impact of climate change is systematically built into national security and defence planning.”²⁷

Professor of Environmental Studies and Politics David Orr has a different but related approach to climate change. He refers to our current situation and the one that we

²⁶ Nafeez Ahmend, “Pentagon bracing for public dissent over climate and energy shocks.” *The Guardian*, June 14, 2013, accessed July 14, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/earth-insight/2013/jun/14/climate-change-energy-shocks-nsa-prism>.

²⁷ Harald Welzer, *Climate Wars: Why People will Be Killed in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 65-6.

will be in for centuries if not thousands of years as “the long emergency.”²⁸ In this he includes not just climate destabilization, but also the end of cheap oil, ecological degradation, and other linked social and natural problems. He argues that during the long emergency “government will be required to take unprecedented measures...the capacity of emergency management will have to be made much more robust and effective, not just for intermittent events but for multiple events, which may occur regularly. When climate change-driven emergencies become normal, government must have the capacity to quickly and effectively rebuild shattered communities and economies on a more resilient basis.”²⁹ While Schmitt argues that we always need to be alert to exceptions that interrupt the norm, Orr suggests that climate destabilization will be so intense that the exception will become the norm. The most important and necessary response for him comes through governance and strong leadership. Orr is aware of and worried about the authoritarian tendencies in this position, and he does a lot to try and specify the kinds of actions that future leadership should take, emphasizing education, being humane, and condemning military action.

Schmitt's political-theology, however, helps us see the connections between a vision like Orr's and the one pursued by Reagan, Bush, and Obama's military. Though there are many differences between them, they all rely on the efficacy of state sovereign power relatively insulated from popular accountability to make difficult emergency decisions. Orr's vision presumes the emergence of an effective and humane leader who can educate and convince the public of her vision and maintain extensive democratic support for it. But the two exemplars he draws on, Lincoln and Roosevelt, both engaged in dictatorial practices to carry out their policies. Orr underestimates the difficulty of maintaining support for leadership as problems escalate, intense changes to ways of living have to be made, and

²⁸ Orr, *Down to the Wire*, xii.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 32-3.

results are slow. Such a situation makes militaristic control more likely. It may not be wise to promote a political response to climate change that emphasizes the necessity of sovereign power. Such responses tend to deal with the uncertainty of the event by using sovereign power to minimize and control that uncertainty until a stable and normal situation can be brought about.

Kierkegaard's thought suggests an alternative response that engages the event positively rather than allowing the lures of comfortable jobs in a secure and prosperous society to distract and blind us. Criticizing those who ward off anxiety and uncertainty, Kierkegaard pushes us to work the experience of anxiety and uncertainty to their depths. Climate change produces a condition of anxiety through the uncertainty of what will happen, the uncertainty of how to respond, and the vital threat to individuals and species. We are in the position of Abraham, who was unsure of his relation to the event of God's command and unsure of what to do with the life of his precious son on the line. This anxiety is incommunicable: each person must sound out their own relation to climate change, to their mode of being, to their expectations about life, to changing their own existence, to the future of their children, the kind of world they live in, and the future of human and other species. There is no formula for how one comes to terms with this, incorporating the uncertainty, distress, and anxiety of the situation into one's life. No doubt this is one reason so many people resist or ignore the issue and why so few positive responses have emerged.

Kierkegaard's response of faith is reached through a decision in which one cannot rely on others or expect a calculable outcome.³⁰ For both Schmitt and Kierkegaard the event presses the individual to a decision, though there are differences between them. Each draws on the existential in a different way. For Schmitt it is a matter of concrete life and existential

³⁰ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 79, 51.

threat, whereas Kierkegaard is concerned with how to deal with the internal tension of anxiety in an individual. A Schmittian decision often tends toward securing social order; a Kierkegaardian one gives up the desire for the security of order to live through anxiety. Kierkegaard suggests that if we come to terms with the anxiety and uncertainty of the exception, we can live better in a world that is replete with discomfort and insecurity as well as elation and joy.

Not only does Kierkegaard urge a form of belief that works through uncertainty, he teaches us to have faith in this world specifically. He examines a number of worldly characteristics of the one who has faith, such as their tone of voice³¹ and timing.³² He describes the knight of faith: “He is solid all the way through. His stance? It is vigorous, belongs entirely to *finitude*; no spruced-up burgher walking out to Fresberg on a Sunday afternoon treads the earth more solidly. He *belongs entirely to the world*; no bourgeois philistine could belong to it more...every time one sees him participating in something particular, he does it with an assiduousness that marks *the worldly man who is attached to such things*.”³³ Kierkegaard describes further the meal this knight hopes for and the poorer meal he enjoys just as much, the way he smokes his pipe, observes the street, and talks with a stranger. Faith is not something that manifests itself with abstraction, other-worldliness, or aristocratic distance. Even if Abraham cannot articulate his faith to those in the world, he still lives within it, despite being called by the divine.

Yet Abraham had faith, and had faith for this life. In fact, if his faith had been only for a life to come, he certainly would have more readily discarded everything in order to rush out of a world to which he did not belong. But Abraham's faith was not of this sort, if there is such a faith at all, for actually it is not faith but the most remote possibility of faith that faintly sees its object on the most distant horizon but is separated from it by a chasmal abyss in which doubt plays its tricks. But Abraham had faith specifically for this life—faith that he would

³¹ Ibid., 21.

³² Ibid., 35.

³³ Ibid., 39. My italics.

grow old in this country, be honored among the people, blessed by posterity, and unforgettable in Isaac, the most precious thing in his life....”³⁴

Faith is not detached, but is expressed as faith in this world. Those who have reacted to the anxieties and doubts about how to live in a problematic world fraught with personal, global, and spiritual events by finding themselves living and believing vigorously in this world are the strongest expressions of faith that we can find.

Kierkegaard shows how both the first and the third theological responses to climate change are false and harmful. To the first, he shows that we need to give up security, routine, and comfort in order to experience the events that really are happening to us. Instead of using uncertainty to push away the event, we need to embrace it as a source to help us commit to the event. Where Pearce's statement of uncertainty falls short, Kierkegaard's dramatization may help to accept and work through it. Beyond this, apocalyptic visions that focus on a model of Christianity that seeks another world fail to carry out the movement of faith. Kierkegaard wants events to cause us to fall in love with this world.

Gilles Deleuze draws selectively on Kierkegaard to expand this call for faith: “The modern fact is that we no longer believe in this world. We do not even believe in the events which happen to us, love, death, as if they only half concerned us. It is not we who make cinema; it is the world which looks to us like a bad film...The link between man and the world is broken. Henceforth, this link must become an object of belief: it is the impossible which can only be restored within a faith. Belief is no longer addressed to a different or transformed world...Whether we are Christians or atheists, in our universal schizophrenia, *we need reasons to believe in this world.*”³⁵ To what extent do our lives, in how we succeed and consume, in how we love and learn, in how we relate to friends and strangers, and in how we

³⁴ Ibid., 20. My italics.

³⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 171-2.

dream and commit look like a bad film? If our connections to the world are anchored in belonging to deep regularities, then a Kierkegaardian faith can connect us to a world replete with volatility, surprises, and periods of irregularity. The world around us is shifting and we do not notice and respond because we do not believe in this world. Instead, we prefer fantasies that support our comforts, desires, and the existential security of a routine and calculable world. More intense storms, droughts and fires, rising seas, forced migrations of people, intensified state security apparatuses, and the increasingly looming threat of crossing a tipping point that would set off runaway climate change impinge upon our lives, presenting opportunities to reforge our link the world, to begin to see, hear, and act in it again. Yet for Deleuze, Nietzsche inspires belief in this world by drawing on the texture of our experience in it rather than transcendental sources outside of it.

The Ethics of Drives and Habits

One book that directly confronts the human refusal to believe in climate change is Clive Hamilton's *Requiem for a Species*. He frames the problem as one of coming to terms with a catastrophic event.

Most people do not disbelieve what the climate scientists have been saying about the calamities expected to befall us. But accepting intellectually is not the same as accepting emotionally the possibility that the world as we know it is heading for a horrible end. It's the same with our own deaths; we all 'accept' that we will die, but it is only when death is imminent that we confront the true meaning of our mortality...No one is willing to say publicly what the climate science is telling us: that we can no longer prevent global warming that will this century bring about a radically transformed world that is much more hostile to the survival and flourishing of life...this is no longer an expectation of what might happen if we do not act soon; this will happen, even if the most optimistic assessment of how the world might respond to the climate disruption is validated.³⁶

This alters the approach to climate change in a few significant ways. The problem is no longer the facts of the event, but rather our unreadiness to internalize them as part of a

³⁶ Hamilton, *Requiem for a Species*, x-xi.

different vision of the world. It is no longer a matter of responding quickly to avert disaster, but of trying to keep the disaster in check. We no longer have to adopt a more environmentally conscious lifestyle, but also adapt to a very different world than one we have ever known. It is through this different approach that Hamilton seeks to explain why we have failed to act so far, why we may continue to do so, and what the implications may be.

Though the scientific information on climate change does not alone produce an adequate response to the problem, it is nonetheless an important element in crafting such a response. Hamilton summarizes our situation based on recent findings:

The conclusion that, even if we act promptly and resolutely, the world is on a path to reach 650 ppm is almost too frightening to accept. That level of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere will be associated with warming of about 4°C by the end of the century, well above the temperature associated with tipping points that would trigger further warming. So it seems that even with the most optimistic set of assumptions—the ending of deforestation, a halving of emissions associated with food production, global emissions peaking in 2020 and then falling by 3 per cent a year for a few decades—we have no chance of preventing emissions rising well above a number of critical tipping points that will spark uncontrollable climate change. The Earth's climate would enter a chaotic era lasting thousands of years before natural processes eventually establish some sort of equilibrium. Whether human beings would still be a force on the planet, or even survive, is a moot point. One thing seems certain: there will be far fewer of us.³⁷

Hamilton does not hesitate to state the conclusion that climate change will be disastrous for the human population. This statement contrasts with the way policy papers and scientific reports tend to rely on assumptions that soften the crisis.³⁸ The problem is that the assumptions involved do not just skew the data in a certain way. Rather, they *infuse* the data with an entirely different worldview. In this view, climate change is gradual, manageable, and fundamentally compatible with our way of living. In fact, we need a view which

³⁷ Ibid., 21-2.

³⁸ Ibid., 23-31.

acknowledges that either we must radically change or the world will radically change us. As Hamilton puts it, “humans cannot regulate the climate; the climate regulates us.”³⁹

The problem is the way climate change is embedded within cultural drives and social institutions. “This book is about...the frailties of the human species, the perversity of our institutions and the psychological dispositions that have set us on a self-destructive path. It is about our strange obsessions, our penchant for avoiding the facts, and, especially, our hubris. It is the story of a battle within us between the forces that should have caused us to protect the Earth—our capacity for reason and our connection to Nature—and those that in the end have won out—our greed, materialism and alienation from Nature.”⁴⁰ We have not been able to accept and respond to information about climate change because of the countervailing habits, beliefs, dispositions, and practices through which we live. They abstract our lives from nature as a vital system of which we are a part. Even though we have already gone too far to prevent disastrous climate change, we still need to engage this problem. “Accepting the reality of climate change does not mean we should do nothing. Cutting global emissions quickly and deeply can at least delay some of the worst effects of warming. But sooner or later we must face up to the truth and try to understand why we have allowed the situation that now confronts us. Apart from the need to understand how we arrived at this point, the main justification for the book is that by setting out what we face we can better prepare ourselves for it.”⁴¹ Neither continued denial nor resigned acceptance is an adequate response. Our situation is bad, but it could be worse. A nihilistic shrug or individualistic hedonism that acknowledges the truth without connecting to it fails to recognize that nature will press change upon us if we do not adopt it ourselves.

³⁹ Ibid., 24.

⁴⁰ Ibid., xii.

⁴¹ Ibid., xiii.

Undertaking such a change requires that we examine the drives that pushed us in this direction to begin with.

One of these drives is growth fetishism. The problem is not that growth itself is necessary to sustain human society since studies have shown that the costs of restricting greenhouse emissions would be tiny, perhaps only a one year delay in the doubling of incomes between now and 2050.⁴² “The obstacle to taking resolute action is not economic growth as such but the *fixation* with economic growth, the growth fetish, the *unreasonable* obsession that arises because growth is believed to have magical powers.⁴³ Growth has become invested with a symbolism that identifies it with the vitality, living standards, and happiness of a society. When economists, politicians, and commentators refuse to acknowledge that we can cut emissions while still maintaining growth, they rely on assumptions beyond economic analyses. Rather than being based on neutrality, scientific detachment and rationality, “ethical judgments always underpin economic analysis.”⁴⁴

The same holds for science. As Hamilton notes, studies such as *The Silent Spring* and *The Limits to Growth*, “while ostensibly scientific in intention and method...perhaps unwittingly, called on humans to reconsider their very nature.”⁴⁵ Such ethical-scientific challenges bring our lived relation to climate change to the fore. Since scientific findings both contain ethical assumptions and confront opposing ones, they are not adequate for convincing people to change the way they live. Though scientific findings can destabilize growth fetishism by showing that growth and responsible emissions policies are simultaneously possible, they can also entrench it when they legitimize an economic

⁴² Ibid., 51.

⁴³ Ibid., 64.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 56. For a more thorough discussion of this theme, see William E. Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity American Style* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2008), Chapter 1.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 37-8.

approach to solving climate destabilization.⁴⁶ Confronting climate change means addressing and reshaping cultural drives such as growth fetishism. It also requires reshaping the infrastructure of consumption through which needs and luxuries are satisfied. Though Hamilton attends to the psychological aspects of consumption, he neglects its material and existential aspects.

Beyond its sacred position in society, growth also fuels the construction of individual identities. Hamilton argues that our growth fetish imposes public imperatives that are mirrored in individual consumption drives. Consumption is driven by the desire to produce an authentic self and the correlate impossibility of completing this task, which leads to further consumption.⁴⁷ The result is a society of individuals who have too many possessions, believe that they are too materialistic, have lost connection to more important values, and yet nonetheless continue the same behavior. This drive is a potent obstacle to cultivating climate sensitivity. “If, in order to solve climate change, we are asked to change the way we consume, then we are being asked to give up our identities—to experience a sort of death. So firmly do many of us cling to our manufactured selves that we unconsciously fear relinquishing them more than we fear the consequences of climate change. So the campaign to maintain a livable climate is in this sense a war against our own sense of who we are.”⁴⁸ If most people are locked into this dilemma, then it is not surprising that they have been unresponsive to the threat of climate change.

Most people are not used to thinking about themselves through cultural drives such as growth fetishism and consumer identity. Foucault directs us to this register when he argues that developing an ethic of the self is an important and timely task: “When today we

⁴⁶ Ibid., 52-3.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 70-1.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 74-5.

see the meaning, or rather the almost total absence of meaning, given to some nonetheless very familiar expressions which continue to permeate our discourse—like getting back to oneself, freeing oneself, being oneself, being authentic, etcetera...then I do not think we have anything to be proud of in our current efforts to reconstitute an ethic of the self.”⁴⁹ This idea of creating an authentic self is close to Hamilton's analysis of how we consume. Foucault does not believe in an authentic self. Rather, he admits the difficulty of constituting an affirmative self even as he rejects the idea of a complete or authentic self. Addressing practices of caring for oneself would give a sharper edge to climate change advocates trying to change their own behavior as well as those of others. Add to this Nietzsche's experimentation with habits while attending to drives, and the necessary but difficult task of engaging Hamilton's obstacles to climate consciousness becomes possible. Nietzsche connects such individual efforts to intersubjective encounters and Foucault extends them to joining social movements. A multifaceted approach consisting of personal and collective efforts is necessary to press a broader public response to climate change.

Green products feed into a particularly problematic self-identity in which self-satisfaction meets questionably ethical consumption habits. Hamilton argues that individual action is ineffective and that collective action is necessary to respond to the climate crisis.⁵⁰ While individual action is insufficient, the reverse is also true: someone who advocates regulatory reform and votes accordingly but consumes conventionally also contributes to an inadequate response. Indeed, advocating the necessity of collective action while downplaying the importance of the individual can often serve as a justification for continued hyper-consumerism until regulatory reform is implemented. The fact is that the climate crisis

⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, ed. Frédéric Gros trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2005), 251.

⁵⁰ Hamilton, *Requiem*, 78.

entails an accumulation of individual consumption changes whether it comes before or after regulatory reform. There is good reason to change individual consumption as soon as possible while continuing to push for collective action. The two are interlinked, since a change in consumption ethos helps to prepare you for political change and the latter can support that ethos.

Hamilton further argues that green consumerism transfers the responsibility from corporations and institutions to the individual. “Instead of being understood as a set of problems endemic to our economic and social structures, we are told that we each have to accept liability for our personal contribution to every problem.”⁵¹ Tied to this is what he sees as a negative effect on democracy: green consumerism makes the debate about individual rather than institutional problems, which empowers us as consumers while disempowering us as citizens and in the end trades off real solutions for minor ones.⁵² But individual activity is not zero-sum. Nor is it limited to only two modes of engagement. If people are going to use energy, they should use responsibly produced energy. This is more likely to feed into ecologically conscious public advocacy than free-market individualism, while giving more resources to responsible companies to engage in public advocacy efforts as well. Beyond this, climate responsiveness will have to be taken up by community organizations, social movements, strategically located producers, international regulatory agencies, indigenous groups, NGOs, independent scientific advisory committees, and cultural producers in sites such as theater and education. Hamilton wants to show that individual action is not sufficient because climate destabilization is a structural problem in our society and culture, yet he fails to give enough attention to the fact that that structure is composed of individual, civic, state, and international actors. If the cultural growth fetish is mirrored on the

⁵¹ Ibid., 79.

⁵² Ibid., 80.

individual level as a self built through consumption, then we always have to attend to the many sides of the problem, building resonances between them.

Hamilton, though, thinks that green consumerism may operate at one additional level that undermines collective efforts.

One of the striking features of the campaign to persuade us to change how we use energy is the way the various organisations stress that we do not have to give up any of our comforts...Indeed, the consumption of 'green' consumer goods has itself become a method of self-creation through consumption practices (albeit a sometimes far less damaging one). By shifting responsibility on to individuals and reinforcing the sacrosanct nature of consumer lifestyles, green consumerism threatens to entrench the very attitudes and behaviors that have given us global warming.⁵³

The problems of creating a green self through consumption and of using the image of being green to perpetuate consumption are serious concerns. Many corporate campaigns urge green consumerism, pushing us to continue consuming without having to give up any comfort. But ecologists, local producers, environmental activist groups, and others argue that green consumption also means non-consumption. This version of ecologically responsible consumption suggests that we buy green when we have to, and buy nothing when we don't. There is a reason why green consumption is difficult to address. Hamilton is correct that there are drives operating in the individual that resist climate consciousness, and that consumerist forces are already trying to capture positive energy for change and redirect it to consumption. But focusing on collective action will not be sufficient to address engrained individual habits and resistances. This is why bringing Foucauldian and Nietzschean approaches to the relationship between the individual, society, and climate change might be an important point of engagement.

Though Hamilton does not explore the issue thoroughly, he does suggest the importance of experiments that connect us more deeply to the threat of climate change. He

⁵³ Ibid., 81.

notes studies that show that humans are more responsive to instinctive reactions and visceral evaluations of risk than they are to consequentialist reasoned judgments. Though extreme weather events may be increasing the opportunities for the former, we only confront climate change through the latter mode of risk evaluation. But “as the effects of warming are delayed, a proportionate response requires us to anticipate emotions we may feel many years hence; anticipation of feelings is a weak stimulus compared to pressing anxieties we may have about job losses or higher taxes...we need to use our reason to stimulate our fears.”⁵⁴ Hamilton speculates about this approach, yet believes that it cannot be very effective. Nietzsche however described how to carry out such a reconfiguration of drives and experiences. Klossowski argues that Nietzsche was able to remove himself from gregarious worries on the same order as those about jobs and taxes. At the same time, he produced imagined intensities of experience as simulacra that were then incorporated into lived experience. Though it is not carried out through reason, as in Hamilton's version, Nietzsche's approach to the event enables him to make it immediately felt, suggesting that a similar procedure could be carried out with practices of consumption in an era of climate change.

Foucault's analysis suggests a more critical aspect to individual responsiveness: cultivating and reconfiguring the self means producing an art of living. This art of living is a matter of making actions, habits, and discourse line up with truths in which we believe. His suggestion would be to develop practices that enable us to live our lives according to a belief in climate destabilization. It is hard to take someone seriously on climate issues when they fly multiple times a year, drive a car, and engage in the rest of the behaviors typically attributed to an affluent society. To advocate for collective action on climate change, one should

⁵⁴ Ibid., 119-120

already live that advocacy, and vice versa. The affective and discursive force of such a mode of living reinforces advocacy in a way that effectively destabilizes entrenched drives and assumptions. George Monbiot dramatizes this effect in the beginning of his book, *Heat: How to Stop the Planet from Burning*.

Two things prompted me to write this book. The first was something that happened in May 2005, in a lecture hall in London. I had given a talk about climate change, during which I had argued that there was little chance of preventing runaway global warming unless greenhouse gases were cut by 80 per cent. The third question stumped me.

'When you get your 80 per cent cut, what will this country look like?'

I hadn't thought about it. Nor could I think of a good reason *why* I hadn't thought about it. But a few rows from the front sat one of the environmentalists I admire and fear most, a man called Mayer Hillman. I admire him because he says what he believes to be true and doesn't care about the consequences. I fear him because his life is a mirror in which the rest of us see our hypocrisy.

'That's such an easy question I'll ask Mayer to answer it.'

He stood up. He is 75, but looks about 50, perhaps because he goes everywhere by bicycle. He is small and thin and fit-looking, and he throws his chest out and holds his arms to his sides when he speaks, as if standing to attention. He was smiling. I could see he was going to say something outrageous.

'A very poor third-world country.'⁵⁵

Mayer Hillman's advocacy is supported by his mode of being. Monbiot captures his felt presence and how his intensity impinges on the way others feel admiration and fear. The effect was not slight since it was one critical moment spurring Monbiot to write his book. The embodied difference between Hillman and others in the room produces an event in which the way Hillman's practices, discourses, and mode of living express his position interrupts other people's lives. But perhaps they will also be inspired by this interruption. Individual efforts do have an effect, particularly when they feed into other modes of social and civic advocacy.

⁵⁵ Monbiot, *Heat*, ix.

In addition to cultural and individual drives, Hamilton outlines several types of cognitive dissonance that cause people to deny, ignore, or reinterpret climate change evidence when they are confronted by it. According to Hamilton, the roots of climate skepticism lie in the transfer of cold-war animosity from communism to environmentalism. First, calls for environmental responsibility were painted with a similar brush that labeled them anti-growth, anti-modernity, and anti-American. The second move was to reframe environmental science as politically infected and not objective, undermining the legitimacy of its claims. Finally, an institutional structure was created to actively foster alternative scientific accounts and further promote doubt about climate change.⁵⁶ The effect of cognitive dissonance was to discredit and defuse the findings that challenged the American way of life.

This raises the problem of whether there is a neutral domain free of politics. Hamilton extends his argument that ethical values underpin economic and scientific analyses. Scientific findings on the climate suggest the need for business and market regulation at an international level, if not a more assertive attempt to curtail a cultural focus on growth, technology, and consumption. “So neo-conservatives were right to identify environmentalism, and its hold on the public imagination, as a threat to their worldview and political aspirations.”⁵⁷ Indeed, Naomi Klein argues that “science is telling us all to revolt.”⁵⁸ Climate change has politicized the scientific domain. The result on the social level is that “rejection of global warming ha[s] for some Americans become a means of consolidating and signaling their cultural identity, in the way that beliefs about patriotism, welfare and musical tastes do.”⁵⁹ The problem is not just that climate skeptics refuse to recognize the

⁵⁶ Hamilton, *Requiem*, 98-106.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵⁸ Naomi Klein, “Naomi Klein: How science is telling us all to revolt,” *The New Statesman*, Oct 29, 2013, accessed August 2, 2014, <http://www.newstatesman.com/2013/10/science-says-revolt>.

⁵⁹ Hamilton, *Requiem*, 108.

scientific truth, but that the scientific findings already imply the need to seriously change the way of living that the skeptics support. The point can be taken further. A minority within that camp likely does not care whether the science is true or not: even if the science is true, they are more committed to perpetuating a way of life that is comfortable for them than having to change to save future generations. That position, however, has far less political traction, hence the strategy producing cognitive dissonance.

Cognitive dissonance magnifies and distorts the problem of uncertainty in climate change. “For sceptics (many of whom are engineers) the return of chaotic nature seems to harbour a special fear. They are scornful of climate models because they do not predict the future with certainty, thereby attributing the irreducible uncertainty of climate systems to the personal failings of the scientists who try to model them.”⁶⁰ The uncertainty that is a feature of life in general becomes particularly apparent in climate studies. Many people have developed mindsets and lifestyles in accord with the assumptions of continued technological development and a human ability to shape the environment. While they have been able to repress challenges to this vision in other places, it seems more difficult to do so with climate change, intensifying the need to transfer uncertainty from the climate itself to those investigating it.

Finally, Hamilton lists a number of other coping strategies to continue putting off coming to terms with the climate threat. These include reinterpreting the threat, pleasure seeking, and blame shifting. Each of these serves to allow already established beliefs and behaviors to continue undisturbed while minimizing the significance of climate destabilization. One particularly interesting strategy is “the mendacity of hope.” “The evidence that large-scale climate change is unavoidable has now become so strong that

⁶⁰ Ibid., 118-9.

healthy illusion is becoming unhealthy delusion. Hoping that a major disruption to the Earth's climate can be avoided is a delusion. Optimism sustained against the facts, including unfounded beliefs in the power of consumer action or in technological rescue, risks turning hopes into fantasies.”⁶¹ The theme of hope promoted by many who urge climate responsiveness may be clouding our ability to come to terms with the climate crisis. The urgency of the climate problem has become such that hope, rather than giving energy to our efforts, is fooling us into believing that the problem is not as bad as it is.

If anyone really understands climate destabilization, it should be the scientists studying it. Hamilton went to a conference on extreme climate change to study their dispositions. The conference participants were replete with pessimism, depression, despair, dark humor, and even a celebration of non-futurism. “One, a woman in her early thirties, told the conference that she was feeling smug: 'I don't have any children and many of my friends don't want to have children'.”⁶² Another scientist held out for reason and the power of facts: “The only response...is to 'bombard politicians with scientific information every day'.”⁶³ A French sociologist in attendance pushed the discussion in another direction: “Can we continue to gamble with democracy?”⁶⁴ This last response is subject to the same problems as Orr and Schmitt. Furthermore, the insufficiency of simply counting on enough facts and information to finally awaken reason to rapid responsiveness has been dealt with.

The combination of nihilism and hedonism embodied in the first response is tempting. If it's already too late, perhaps we should just enjoy what can be enjoyed now without projecting any decent future, accepting extreme climate disasters as an inevitability for others to endure. Climate scientist James Lovelock has adopted this position, and

⁶¹ Ibid., 132.

⁶² Ibid., 204.

⁶³ Ibid., 197.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 207.

suggests that people “Enjoy life while [they] can. Because if [they're] lucky it's going to be 20 years before it hits the fan.”⁶⁵ This is a form of coming-to-terms with the event of climate change that has the effect of helping control population even as it undermines other forms of responsible behavior. But Lovelock sees this culling of the population as part of a positive movement according to which “eventually we'll have a human on the planet that really does understand it and can live with it properly.”⁶⁶ Such a view expresses a misguided faith that humans necessarily have a place on earth and that human perfection is possible. Thus despite Lovelock's characteristic callousness toward human life, he is unable to confront the contingency of human life in the way that Nietzsche and Foucault do to come to terms with the event. But his view also shares an unfortunate assumption with his free-market principles. Evolutionary and economic theories that emphasize elimination as the only method of selection fail to understand the manifold ways in which each unfolds. Additionally, they attribute to life and the market a teleology that neither has.

This combination of nihilism and hedonism seems to express an understanding of the weight of the issue, and it challenges some of the fantasies and identifications that sustain our contemporary culture. Yet what this study of the ethos of the event reveals is that such a view fails to be attached to this world. Indeed, it expresses an active will not to be part of this world at this time. Such a disposition does not accept an eventful world, but resents it. When great changes are upon us and sacrifices and discomfort have to be endured, this disposition pushes people to go out with the fading era, celebrating its final days. At the same time, its adherents discourage others in their efforts to change, and derive positive enjoyment from the misfortune of others, just as the woman who found validation

⁶⁵ Decca Aitkenhead, “James Lovelock: “enjoy life while you can: in 20 years global warming will hit the fan”,” *The Guardian*. March 1, 2008, accessed August 2, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2008/mar/01/scienceofclimatechange.climatechange>.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

in her choice not to have kids in the projected foolishness of those who do. For her, she is right and the others do not know what is coming. It seems that many scientists closest to the issue may not have much to offer us in terms of a useful disposition. As the double meaning of the title of his film *Encounters at the End of the World* indicates, Herzog documents not only the McMurdo Research Station in Antarctica, but also the dispositions of the scientists there toward a human future. The reaction of one cell biologist in particular is telling: “Sam Bowser likes to show doomsday science-fiction films to the researchers. Many of them express grave doubts about our long-ranging presence on this planet. Nature, they predict, will regulate us.”⁶⁷ Attuned to the world through the intense and fragile environment in Antarctica, these scientists do not have much hope for our planetary prospects.

How can we respond to climate destabilization when it seems that even acknowledging its full impact tends to fill people with despair? According to Hamilton, it is necessary to work through this feeling. “Sooner or later we must respond and that means allowing ourselves to enter a phase of desolation and hopelessness, in short, to grieve. Climate disruption will require that we change not only how we live but how we conceive of our selves; to recognise and confront a gap between our inner lives—including our habits and suppositions about how the world will evolve—and the sharply divergent reality that climate science now presents us.”⁶⁸ For Kierkegaard, despair can be an important part of embracing the event. It can allow us to sound out our relation to the event and start reworking ourselves to change that relation, as Eric Holthaus did when despair led him to give up flying.⁶⁹ Indeed, all of the thinkers in this study—though Schmitt to a lesser extent—emphasize that we must be willing to endure negativity, loss, and change in order to

⁶⁷ *Encounters at the End of the World*, directed by Werner Herzog, 2007, (Hollywood: Image Entertainment, 2008), DVD.

⁶⁸ Hamilton, *Requiem*, 211.

⁶⁹ See chapter two for a full discussion of this.

transform our dispositions. Hamilton puts it in a language similar to Foucault's limit-experiences: one should become “an active agent in his or her own disintegration.”⁷⁰ This ability is critical for addressing Hamilton's idea of a gap between how we conceive of ourselves and the reality of the world. An ethos that accommodates us to an eventful world prepares us to accept and respond to change and to love a world that contains loss.

Such an ethos is critical to how we respond to events. Drawing on a number of studies, Hamilton argues that a direct confrontation with climate change can produce a retreat and entrenchment of engrained behavior. A careful approach is required to connect to a nature that is sometimes hostile. According to him, the key element seems to be whether the confrontation is sustained or fleeting. An ethos that is slowly shaped to endure a prolonged engagement with death and loss can accept new circumstances and reshape itself through reflection and experimentation. Short and disconnected reminders of mortality, threat, and uncertainty have the opposite effect.⁷¹ The goal is to change “the very way we see and understand the world, our way of being in the world.”⁷² Climate destabilization has been brought on by how we live. An ethos of the event attunes us not just to the event, but to this structure and to how we understand and make meaning out of it. It draws on the event to reshape that structure, produce new ways of living and new forms of meaning. Hamilton even suggests, in a way that Kierkegaard might anticipate, that we will see a return from a scientific-modern structure of experience to one connected to new forms of faith.⁷³

Hamilton ends on a different Schmittian note than Orr. The political threat of climate change, he argues, is great. “We should remember that once the dramatic implications of the climate crisis are recognised by the powerful as a threat to themselves

⁷⁰ Hamilton, *Requiem*, 215.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 216-18.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 219.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 220-22.

and their children they will, unless resisted, impose their own solutions on the rest of us, ones that will protect their interests and exacerbate unequal access to the means of survival, leaving the weak to fend for themselves...We must democratise survivability.”⁷⁴ Much like Orr, Hamilton sees the political process as corrupted, particularly with regard to environmental issues. He starts to go beyond Orr, however, in suggesting that we cannot rely on that system to respond democratically, or even to treat us justly when it is finally forced to respond. He rejects the idea that an emergency government could form which would be able to respond to climate change justly. Instead, he suggests using our confrontation with climate change to rework ourselves existentially and politically.

Hamilton urges us to produce civil disobedience events that interrupt the regular legal order to respond more actively and critically to climate destabilization. “We all value and benefit from a law-abiding society. Yet at times like these we have a higher duty and are no longer bound to submit to the laws that protect those who continue to pollute the atmosphere in a way that threatens to destroy the habitability of the Earth. When just laws are used to protect unjust behavior our obligation to uphold the laws is diminished.”⁷⁵ We need to engage Schmitt's framework, but critically resist his ethos of security. We instead press the law at critical points, pick strategic moments to break it, and risk ourselves for the sake of changing it. Such an ethos can make us politically responsive to the climate threat. Climate scientist and role model Jim Hansen engaged in civil disobedience and was arrested to highlight the importance of the issue. Though he was already breaking the law as the director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, he has since resigned to devote himself to political action.⁷⁶ Climate destabilization may force us to give up considerable

⁷⁴ Ibid., 223.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 225.

⁷⁶ Justin Gillis, “Climate Maverick to Retire from NASA,” *The New York Times*, April 1, 2013, accessed

material and existential comforts, endure greater physical discomfort, and provoke political risk.

A Tragic Event?

Tragedy is a concept employed by many people writing about the dangers of climate change. This suggests that climate destabilization is so problematic, unfortunate, and traumatic that a tragic frame is required to think and talk about it. Though the tragedy of climate change is not referred to in a consistent way across the literature, there are a couple of different versions.

One version of the tragic event is given in its simplest form by Nietzsche through the event of the human: “After Nature had taken breath awhile the star congealed and the clever animals had to die.”⁷⁷ The insight that this type of tragedy seeks to express is that for all of the meaning and worth that we attach to humanity and its great accomplishments, it is nonetheless contingent and nature is indifferent to our existence. Humans are tempted to overvalue their place and perhaps even mistake the world as made for them or at least as being necessarily hospitable. In this vein, David Orr refers to W.G. Sebald to frame our contemporary carbon consumption. “Combustion is the hidden principle behind every artefact we create...From the earliest times, human civilization has been no more than a strange luminescence growing more intense by the hour, of which no one can say when it will begin to wane and when it will fade away. For the time being, our cities still shine through the night, and the fires still spread.”⁷⁸ Orr uses Sebald to invoke an image of

September 11, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/02/science/james-e-hansen-retiring-from-nasa-to-fight-global-warming.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.

⁷⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Falsity in their Ultramoral Sense,” *Early Greek Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge (Edinburgh: T.N. Foulis, 1911), 173.

⁷⁸ Orr, *Down to the Wire*, 111. For similar sentiments, see Pearce, *With Speed and Violence*, xxviii, Hamilton, *Requiem*, 24, and Monbiot, *Heat*, viii.

humans as defined by their energy-driven achievements, yet these achievements cannot existentially justify either themselves or their creators. This is the bind of being caught in a tragic world.

Another version is to view the human relation to climate change as a tragic one in which we bring about our own ruin: “In Ancient Greece Hubris was paired with Nemesis, the god of divine retribution, whose 'blade of vengeance...yields a ripe harvest of repentant wo' on those who imagined themselves to be beyond the reach of the gods or put themselves above the laws of men...Messing with Gaia will perhaps provide the material for the legends of the twenty-second century.”⁷⁹ In this version, arrogance and an unreflective belief in the human ability to master the world lead to our downfall. Specifically, Hamilton is worried about people continuing to live carbon-intensive lives while believing that scientific progress will enable climate-engineering solutions, which themselves carry serious risks. George Monbiot frames climate change in terms of Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*: Mephistopheles is fossil fuel, Faust's magical abilities are our fossil fueled capacities, and the flames of hell are global warming. “Our use of fossil fuels is a Faustian pact.”⁸⁰ This tragic view dramatizes the tension between what we value and the danger it poses to us. Placing our climate predicament in this frame underscores the likelihood that we will not respond in time, thereby committing ourselves to a good deal of suffering. A tragic view may orient responsiveness towards a greater degree of difficulty than might otherwise be anticipated.

Tragedy also raises the issue of timeliness; in this case, the “brief historical interlude between ecological constraint and ecological catastrophe.”⁸¹ In discussions of climate

⁷⁹ Hamilton, *Requiem for a Species*, 180, xii.

⁸⁰ Monbiot, *Heat*, 1-3.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, xi. For a more extensive explanation of the issue of timeliness in climate change that goes beyond the

destabilization, it is not uncommon to hear that it is either too late, or at the very least that our choice is now between a 'soft' or 'hard' landing. Timeliness is a critical component of the tragic tradition.⁸² As Tiresias warns Creon in Sophocles' rendition of *Antigone*: "Then beware, you're standing once again upon the razor's edge."⁸³ Creon doesn't believe or heed Tiresias until it is too late, but the latter's implication is that if Creon were to act wisely now, he may still be able to save that about which he truly cares. George Monbiot thinks our situation is similar today with regard to climate destabilization. "Is it...too late? I don't believe it is. We have a short period – a very short period – in which to prevent the planet from starting to shake us off. Our aim must be to stop global average temperatures from rising to more than 2° above pre-industrial levels, which means more than 1.4° above the current point." Those words were first published in 2007 and the scientific reports have not become more hopeful. Even in 2007 Monbiot thought that there was about a 30% chance that we had "already blown it."⁸⁴ The question, then, is whether tragic possibility will be a spur to action, or a cathartic acceptance of our inability to not destroy ourselves.

Monbiot closes his introduction and begins the rest of the book on a positive note. He switches from Marlowe's Faust tragedy to Goethe's. In this version, Faust is not dragged to hell, but is redeemed and carried off by angels because he never loses his curiosity, labors tirelessly, and eventually turns his work to improving the conditions of human life. "The gifts which threatened to destroy him are deployed instead to save him."⁸⁵ Monbiot wants to motivate the reader for the immense task laid out in the ensuing chapters. He argues that we can only have a good chance of preventing some of the most harmful and extreme effects of

human frame of reference see Naomi Klein, "Climate change is the fight of our lives – and we can hardly bear to look at it," *The Guardian*, April 23, 2013.

⁸² See William E. Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity*, 119-122.

⁸³ Sophocles, *The Oedipus Plays of Sophocles*, trans. Paul Roche (New York: Plume, 2004), 236.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 17, 19.

climate destabilization by cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 90 per cent by 2030.⁸⁶ The rest of the book goes through the details of how this might be possible while maintaining industrial civilization.

If this is still a tragic perspective, then it is a tragic perspective of a different sort. It is not just a matter of a universe that is indifferent to our existence, or hubris, or a critical moment for action before fate sets in. What becomes clear from this angle is that salvation is not possible. If angels carry Faust away at the end of the second part of Goethe's tragedy, this only highlights that such an ending is not possible for us. Our efforts, no matter how well meaning and fervent, cannot lead to anything other than what they lead to. If we prove unable to prevent catastrophic climate change, it is at least likely that our scientific knowledge will progress far enough to give us some sense of the catastrophes that will befall us before they occur. We are creating our own irreversible fate. In such a situation, hope turns against itself. No matter the path we take, climate change will drive humans to bring more suffering and violence upon themselves. This may come in the form of radically scaling back the comforts to which we have become attached, wars fought for livable land and resources, or anything in between as well as violence not yet contemplated. At the peak of the Anthropocene, we must assume the burden of being human in a way we never have before.

The tragedy is that we are caught between two unfortunate outcomes. Creon must either undermine his sovereignty and change what he believes or lose his wife and son. We must either change our values, actions and comfortable way of life, or face the consequences of an increasingly violent climate. The tragic view, however, is not focused on rationally weighing two consequences and choosing the lesser one. The point is that one cannot weigh

⁸⁶ Ibid., xi-xii.

them well because one is already committed in mind and action to a certain path that appears mandatory. A tragic view uses wisdom to heed signs about an uncertain future in order to bring about painful and difficult change. As Monbiot emphasizes: “the campaign against climate change is an odd one...it is a campaign not for abundance but for austerity. It is a campaign not for more freedom but for less. Strangest of all, it is a campaign not just against other people, but also against ourselves.”⁸⁷ Tragic responsiveness does not strike us as reasonable, but as strange; it involves undermining the dispositions that make up who we are. This is why Monbiot frames the necessary response to climate change as a campaign against ourselves. Later we may gain a different sense of abundant living. But at this point, we will largely experience the necessary change as austerity and loss.

Similarly, David Orr points to how “the enemy is us.”⁸⁸ The idea of being against oneself in the sense of having to overcome part of oneself, destroy part of oneself, or modify oneself is emphasized by each of the four thinkers examined in the previous chapters. They all point to this kind of loss at two levels. At the abstract level, the event brings about change that involves loss: it opens possibilities at the same time that it closes upon others. At the personal level, one must have come to terms with this fact to be able to respond to the event. If we are not ready to endure loss and destruction then we are less likely to be willing to recognize and engage the event. Tragedy spiritualizes loss into a disposition that makes the world more meaningful, beautiful, and worthwhile because of the loss it contains, rather than in spite of it. This is how a tragic view connects personal experience to the event and engages it in a way that seeks out its possibilities without being paralyzed by the necessity of giving things up. Austerity and loss of freedom are not ends to be avoided, but transitional states. They do not produce a vacuum, but difference. Tragedy

⁸⁷ Ibid., 215.

⁸⁸ Orr, *Down to the Wire*, 7.

imbues loss with the energy that drives Foucault and Nietzsche as they engage in personal and social experiments. It can do the same for us too.

While Monbiot critically outlines the strategy of the climate change denial industry, this is just the tip of the iceberg. More difficult are people who agree that climate change is a problem, but who deny the full implications of it, including the changes that must be made. Monbiot argues that those countries which have set the most ambitious carbon reduction targets fall far short of what is necessary, and that those who support these targets are in a kind of denial about how big the problem is.⁸⁹ “But the thought that worries me most is this. As people in the rich countries – even the professional classes – begin to wake up to what the science is saying...our response will be to demand that the government acts, while hoping that it doesn't. We will wish our governments to pretend to act. We get the moral satisfaction of saying what we know to be right, without the discomfort of doing it.”⁹⁰ This is a different and more complex kind of denial. Denial is stripped to its core: the only thing that is denied, but more strongly than ever, is the necessity of undergoing discomfort. This denial amounts to a refusal to give anything up, but this cowardice and egotism is reinforced and made socially palatable, or perhaps even noble, by both the moral uprightness of ‘believing’ in the right thing and the hope that displaces responsibility to the government to bring about the change. Monbiot describes this displacement as a “habit of mind,” in which “we can contemplate a transformation of anyone's existence but our own.”⁹¹

A sense of tragic possibility joined to belief in this world would instill us with a different habit of mind. Discomfort would no longer be something that can be avoided, but a necessary part of the world. The question then becomes about the discomforts that we

⁸⁹ Monbiot, *Heat*, 40.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 213-14.

should endure, how to endure them, how to explore them helpfully, and how to engage the transformation they bring about productively. A tragic view resists the tempting distortions of denial, opting instead for painful but not yet tragic futures. If Oedipus had been more attentive to the signs, or more willing to listen to Tiresias, he perhaps could have given up his homeland and kingdom in Thebes and spared himself the painful truth, the loss of his eyes, and a future of beggarly wandering. Instead, he lived through the tragedy and in so doing gained the wisdom to recognize the tragic world around him. Monbiot shows how we already have tragic tales from which we can learn so as to not have to endure them ourselves. Indeed, the discomfort of his proposal that we stop flying and adopt a system of carbon rationing seem minor in comparison to the tragic projections of a future world driven by the violent forces of extreme climate change. As the forces of comfort, denial, habit, hope, and mindset show, this is not a utilitarian or economic decision about maximizing benefit. Instead, making this decision will require a tragic wisdom capable of confronting catastrophic events. We have not yet confronted this event, nor have we yet made this decision.

Wisdom is critical. Although science has and will continue to play an important role in mapping the climate event, it is ineffectual in responding to it. It is the transition from a scientific understanding of climate change to one based on wisdom that a tragic view enables. “[Tragic culture's] most important feature lies in putting wisdom in place of science as the highest goal. This wisdom is not deceived by the seductive distractions of the sciences; instead it turns its unmoved gaze on the total image of the world, and in this image it seeks to embrace eternal suffering with sympathetic feelings of love, acknowledging that suffering to be its own.”⁹² When Nietzsche writes about the seductive distractions of science, he

⁹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999),

means the way that science focuses on knowledge as a solace against suffering and finitude. The problem is that at some point regular international flights by networks of researchers to catalog each measure of glacial melt becomes counterproductive. Complete documentation and knowledge are not yet a response, and wisdom does not require perfect knowledge, but signs, to behave responsibly.⁹³ A tragic vision gives us the wisdom to embrace eternal suffering and with it the terror of our current predicament. It uses the pessimistic energies of confronting suffering to transfigure ourselves and the world we live in. Nietzsche sees this as a movement that justifies a world of tragic possibility and connects this vision to *Faust*, the starting point for Monbiot's exploration: "All that exists is just and unjust and is equally justified in both respects.' That is your world. That you call a world."⁹⁴ Both science and experience have already made it clear that we will suffer considerably under climatic forces in the future, perhaps more than we can even imagine now. Yet a tragic view may one day be able to say "how much did this people have to suffer in order that it might become so beautiful!"⁹⁵

Not a Promethean Task

Now it is happening: threat gives place to
performance.
The earth rocks; thunder, echoing from the depth,
Roars in answer; fiery lightnings twist and flash.
Dust dances in a whirling fountain;
Blasts of the four winds skirmish together,
Set themselves in array for battle;
Sky and sea rage indistinguishably.⁹⁶

87-88.

⁹³ For more on the role of wisdom and political seers today see William E. Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), chapter 6.

⁹⁴ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 51. The first sentence in quotations is Nietzsche's own. The second is from Goethe's *Faust*.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁹⁶ Aeschylus. *Prometheus Bound*, trans. Philip Vellacott (London: Penguin, 1961) 52.

These words could anticipate our future. We have been aware of the threat of climate change and now nature is starting to make good on that threat. They are spoken by Prometheus, who closes Aeschylus's play with these words. Zeus had already chained him to a rock for stealing fire and giving it to humans. This storm begins a second round of punishment for refusing to tell Zeus who would unseat him from power. Prometheus is happy to suffer and wait, knowing that it is not his fate to die, that Zeus will be unseated 13 human generations later, and that then he will be free. We cannot count on the same fate. What will the human species and the earth look like 13 generations hence? We do not and cannot know. It is likely that it will not be good.

The name Prometheus is taken to mean foresight, forethought, or wise-before-the-event. Not having this innate ability, humans need an ethos of the event in order to help cultivate wisdom. The event cannot be known with confidence in advance because it derails established ways of knowing. We do not even understand how to understand an event. A responsive ethos should enable us to detach ourselves from the demand to belong to an organic whole so that we can follow the interruptions of the event; it should motivate experiments that sound out the event and the potentials it contains; it should broaden our receptivity and connect to other macro and micro events to draw inspiration from and reinforce engagements with this one; it should turn our attention to a world with events; it should instill us with resolve to confront uncertainty, discomfort, and loss, and courage to form and follow convictions. Prometheus did not need such measures and it is time that we stop acting as though we do not either.

There is uncertainty in climate change, but it is not just at the level of nature as Pearce claims. The uncertainties are also uncertainties in political systems, human lives, technological advance, biodiversity, and culture. It is unlikely that uncertainty can be

eliminated in any of these domains, let alone in their admixture. It may be that the drive for certainty is already becoming counterproductive in climate responsiveness. There is no doubt that new scientific studies produce interesting and helpful information. But it seems that more information will not help us respond. We may be developing an unhealthy fascination with our unwitting suicide and natural holocaust. There is no knowledge that will guide us on the right path through the climate crisis. What we need instead is the wisdom to read the uncertain signs and engage in dramatic and timely experiments.

Aside from uncertainty, there is the problem of difficulty. It will not just be a matter of winning a political battle against public villains like the Koch brothers. Difficult as that is, it is much easier than the task we face. The difficulties involved might reasonably be compared to quitting smoking, watching a loved one die, going into voluntary exile, or learning how to live in a different society whose language and rules we hardly understand. Kierkegaard shows how difficult it is to be a Christian, a task that is made even more difficult by living in a country that officially calls itself Christian. Nietzsche labors under the difficulty of rooting out all the expressions of a dominant morality in the body and mind. Foucault's return to ancient thought, particularly stoicism, is about finding ways to deal with the fundamental problems of change that have always been difficult for humans: how to give up attachments, comforts, consolatory beliefs, in short, ourselves. Schmitt understood better than many the dangers and opportunities of politics and was still unable to overcome an instilled disposition for security brought about in a top down approach, preferring instead to capitulate and collaborate. Each of these thinkers can serve as a guide to teach us how to deal with existential difficulty.

We need to experiment with ways of cutting carbon from our lives wherever possible. We need to find ways to connect the threat of extreme weather events and

prolonged climatic changes that threaten life to undemocratic political responses and forms of personal austerity. These connections may give us the energy to become involved in a variety of radical personal and democratic projects and experiments. Though each of these activities will be experienced as a loss of freedom in our modes of living, many of the thinkers in this study suggest that we will find ourselves feeling freer on the other side of this transformation.

CV

Kellan Anfinson was expelled from the womb in May of 1984 in Missoula, Montana. There wasn't much snow. Or there was. His powers of perception and categorization at the time combined with his later lack of curiosity concerning the matter leave it a mystery.

At Macalester College in Minnesota he caught a philosophical virus, which remains uncured to this day, despite a series of treatments.

He then spent a year under the tutelage of a remarkable chef in a small kitchen, learning those things which shall remain unknown to those who never leave the library.

His time at Johns Hopkins likely marks the end of his formal academic career, given the neoliberalization of life that is currently underway and the destruction of Universities by those who purport to run them. Or perhaps he was never that good at this...